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THE GENGHIS KHAN AFFAIR

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ROBERT HART DAVIS

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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

AUGUST, 1967 VOL. 4, NO. 1

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE GENGHIS KHAN AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

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Under the great wall of China the ruler of Mongol hordes spoke: "This Russian Illya says he speaks truth. This Chinese rocket man says the same. The gods will decide who is lying. You two will fight; to the death. The man who lives; we will follow him in battle to the end of the world!"

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THE GENGHIS KHAN AFFAIR

From the Great Wall of China to the brooding, silent Kremlin, THRUSH had sent its grim final ultimatum: "Stop U.N.C.L.E., kill Solo and Illya and we rule all Asia. Let them escape and we die to a man!"

THE NEW COMPLETE U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

ACT I—HOME IS WHERE THE THRUSH FLIES

THE MASS of humanity that is the Crown Colony of Hong Kong seems to have a double center on either side of Victoria Harbor at the two slips of the Star ferries. The southern center is in Chung Wan, on the island of Hong Kong itself. The northern center is the slip near the railway terminus on the mainland in Kowloon.

From the Kowloon slip the teeming mainland section of the colony spreads out along such streets as Canton and Chatham Roads until it thins out in the heights and the open country toward the Red Chinese border to the north.

Here, at the border, the grim and unsmiling soldiers of The People's Republic of China stand watch before their buildings with the white signs and red stars.

Between these two points there are many large houses once owned by the colonial rulers. They are still largely owned by the same people, who are no longer rulers but tend to still rule.

On a night in late fall of 1966, one of these large houses was a

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STARRING

NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN

blaze of light. The house itself was a Victorian structure with balconies, and french doors that opened out into spacious grounds thickly overgrown with the semi-tropical vegetation.

Every few moments another car drove up to the main entrance: black Rolls-Royce limousines; Cadillac limousines; ancient Daimlers; the dull-brown military staff cars.

The people who left these cars, to be greeted by butlers, footmen, and their distinguished hosts in evening dress, were resplendent in white ties and tails, evening dresses, and uniforms dazzling with the ribbons of medals. Even the civilians wore shining decorations on colored ribbons.

This glittering gathering filled the house and spilled out through the french doors to stand in chattering groups on the stone terrace that surrounded the house on all sides. Some of the guests even stood on the lawn between the house and the thick undergrowth.

The event was a diplomatic party for the elite of Hong Kong's foreign corps and colony. The host was a high British official, a tall man in full evening dress with the order of The Garter resplendent on his chest. The guest of honor was a very different man.

Dr. Li Po Shue was a small, slender man with the inscrutable face of the Orient, and the polished manners of a life-long diplomat and man of wealth. Dr. Li's face showed no emotion at all as he chatted in the main ballroom with two American staff officers. But his black eyes glittered and betrayed two facts: one, that he was strangely nervous; and two, that his mind was not really on the party.

Dr. Li was a vice-president of the Republic of China, better known as Nationalist China, or, by its enemies, as Chiang's Formosan regime. In this capacity, Dr. Li was a man of great importance to Hong Kong, and was being handled very gingerly by both the British and American officials.

Despite the evidence of his eyes, Dr. Li was smiling and apparently at his ease in the gay gathering. The eyes that turned to watch him all through the room seemed pleased and satisfied that Dr. Li was enjoying himself.

All but the eyes of one man.

This man was a young man of average height, slim, and with a dark mustache. Dressed in evening clothes, the young man seemed the picture of a rising young diplomat in the American service. He wore thick horn-rimmed glasses, held a martini, and chatted brightly with some of the younger women.

Many people watched him, and smiled. He was a most impeccable young diplomat. Serious but not too serious, and obviously enjoying the association of his superiors. The older men had noted, approvingly, that the young diplomat talked easily and at length but said

nothing either serious or stupid.

"Surely you see the need for recognizing the Communist Chinese," a tall, British diplomat said to the young American.

"I see your need," the young man said. "But our need is not yet clear. There are problems."

So the young man talked.

But his eyes were on Dr. Li Po Shue.

He talked, drank, flirted, smiled, and his eyes never really left Dr. Li. He was expert. There were few if any in the crowded room who were at all aware that he had any special interest in the Chinese Vice President. No one noticed that he was never far from Dr. Li.

The evening wore on. The party grew more animated; dinner was served and finished. The dancing began, and the older men drifted into groups, where the conversation became more serious. The tall British host turned just before midnight to find Dr. Li to ask a question.

Dr. Li Po Shue was gone.

The British official frowned. He wondered where he could have gone. But he shrugged it off, and returned to his conversation.

It was at just that instant that the young American with the mustache and glasses also noted the absence of Dr. Li Po Shue. His reaction was different and immediate.

A trifle too abruptly he broke off his conversation and walked quickly from the room out through the french doors. Once in the grounds he broke into a run. He reached the thick bushes and plunged into them, heedless of his elegant evening clothes.

He tore through the thick vegetation, a strange-looking pistol suddenly in his hand. The pistol had appeared as if by magic from beneath his clothes, proving, again, that the young man was more than he seemed.

He ran like a man who knew where he was going, but was not sure what he would find.

He neared the edge of the vegetation around a large open space. He slowed, moved more cautiously. There was a noise to his left.

He whirled just as a giant figure seemed to rise up out of the ground. He had a glimpse of a contorted Chinese face, red-rimmed black eyes, and a long, wicked knife. Then the man was on him.

The giant lunged and seemed to enfold the smaller, slimmer man in evening clothes. A cry of vicious triumph came from the big Chinese.

The complete novels depicting the amazing adventures of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin and the rest of the famous cast of characters making up the great organization known as United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—are especially written, entirely brand-new and inspired by the tremendously exciting MGM-ARENA popular television series—"The Man From U.N.C.L.E."

The cry never finished. The giant gave a strangled choke; his head seemed to snap back as the slim man struck him under the chin with the heel of his hand. Then the giant hurtled through the air to crash at the base of a tree.

Stunned, the giant Chinese still managed to struggle up.

The strange pistol in the hands of the slender man spat once with a sharp, hissing sound.

The giant collapsed instantly.

The slender man in evening dress continued out into the open space that was filled with the cars of the guests.

He crouched low as he moved across among the cars. Near the far side of the mass of cars, close to the exit, he stopped and peered out from behind a black Daimler. What he saw made his eyes narrow.

Dr. Li Po Shue stood there with three other men. They were all Chinese. They spoke quickly, looked back toward the house, and then Dr. Li nodded his head abruptly. The four men all climbed into the black car they stood beside. The car started.

The slender young man turned and ran silently to a small black sports car parked carefully in a place where it could quickly leave the parking lot. He jumped into the small car, and drove off behind the big black car.

He pressed a button on the dashboard of the car and put on a pair of tinted glasses. He smiled. There were no visible lights on his car, no sign of headlights. The car was dark, yet the black car ahead was clearly visible.

The button he had pressed had turned on special infra-red headlights, and the glasses he wore showed the infra-red beams of light as clear as if they were headlights. He had no trouble following the black car while not being seen himself.

But he had other troubles.

He drove with one hand and raised his right hand to his mouth. There was a heavy ring on his finger. He touched it with his thumb, spoke into the ring.

"Sonny here, come in Control Central. Sonny to Control Central."

A dry, quiet voice seemed to speak in the car. "Control Central. This is Waverly, Mr.—uh—Solo. You have a report?"

"Dr. Li Po Shue has left the party," Napoleon Solo said into the radio-ring. "He is with three other Chinese in a black car driving north from Kowloon. He left without being seen or making his official departure. I was attacked by a man apparently on guard."

"North, you say?" Waverly's dry voice said. "It would seem that our information could be correct. Remain in pursuit, Mr. Solo. I repeat—do not lose Dr. Li."

"No matter where he goes?" Solo asked.

"No matter where, Mr. Solo. On his present road he will have to

cross the border at point seven—if he crosses. If necessary, you will cross the border also. Is that clear?"

"Very clear," Solo said drily.

"Good. Uh—be careful, Mr. Solo."

There was a faint edge of amusement in the voice from the tiny ring radio as Solo clicked off the transmission. He settled behind the wheel of his car and looked ahead. The black car was moving fast—and steadily northward.

Napoleon Solo sighed. It looked like a long night. He began to peel off his mustache, revealing the handsome and youthful face that could have belonged to almost any rising young businessman or diplomat. But it did not belong to any simple young executive.

It belonged to Napoleon Solo, Chief Enforcement Officer, Section-II (Operations and Enforcement), United Network Command For Law and Enforcement—better known as U.N.C.L.E.

And it was on U.N.C.L.E. business that Napoleon Solo now drove north from Kowloon toward the border of The People's Republic of China.

The business of saving the world from some new and deadly danger.

TWO

THE DISTANT low line of darker shadows in the night were the hills of Kwangtung Province. The faint curve of silver was the Sham Chun River. Ahead, Solo knew, was the iron-railed bridge where the goods trains crossed between Hong Kong Colony and the first buildings of The People's Republic.

The black car suddenly turned off the highway. Solo nodded. He had not expected them to drive straight up to the border posts. Not because The People's Republic would not let them through, because he had a good idea who the three unidentified Chinese belonged to, which side they were on. No, it was the Hong Kong guards Dr. Li Po Shue and his friends did not want to meet—if U.N.C.L.E.'s information was correct.

Solo followed the black car cautiously off the highway. He had to be more careful now, and yet had to follow more closely or risk losing the car. It was not a situation that the U.N.C.L.E. agent liked, but there was nothing else he could do.

It was certain that Dr. Li and his companions would cross the border—if they crossed—at a point on the Sham Chun River. And Solo would have to cross with them!

The agent continued to drive down the dark dirt side road with one hand, while he prepared his special pistol with his right hand. His quarry would have a crossing arranged, and would have friends waiting for them. All Solo had was himself.

Suddenly he saw the black car stop ahead.

He braked sharply, and at the

same instant heard an explosion and felt his car lift into the air. His ears rung, the pressure almost bursting his ear drums. For a second he was aware of being suspended in mid-air, car and all, and then the car crashed down, tilted, shivered and came to rest.

For a split second Solo sat in the car. In that second he mentally checked himself—no damage.

In the next second he was out of the car and into the thick underbrush that bordered the narrow dirt road. His mind worked calmly. Either he had hit a mine, or they had spotted him and used some kind of grenade or bazooka. A mine was not likely here on the Hong Kong side, especially since the road was narrow, and the black car had passed unscathed.

No, it had to have been an attack, which meant that he had been spotted—and also meant that they would be coming to find him soon.

In the bushes Napoleon Solo peered out. His car lay leaning in a ditch at the side of the dirt road. It had been blown some ten feet. Only the specially-built protective flooring had saved Solo. A small crater in the road showed where the explosion had occurred.

And shadows moved along the road.

Shadows with rifles.

Solo watched the figures approach the wreck of his car. A light shined from behind them and a voice called softly. In the light Solo saw that the men were Red Chinese soldiers!

A squad of Red soldiers on the Hong Kong side of the border. Which meant that the Red Chinese considered Dr. Li Po Shue very valuable. It also meant that the soldiers would be extra wary and extra ruthless. They would want no witnesses alive to tell what was happening.

Solo watched until the squad was near the wrecked car, and then slipped away into the underbrush.

He heard their muttered exclamations behind him when they found the car empty. They would fan out and look for him. But they would not expect him to go where he was going.

He circled and moved ahead toward where the black car was parked in the road.

Other soldiers stood guard beside it. To the right of the road, some hundred yards ahead now, he saw faint shadows going down toward the Sham Chun River.

Solo followed as fast as he could while remaining silent in the dark night. Splashes ahead on the river showed that a boat was moving into shore. Solo slid down the hill and reached the edge of the river. He saw the shadowy figures that waited as the boat moved in.

Solo gripped his pistol. He had to make up his mind in a hurry. He did not want to stop Dr. Li—not yet. And his orders were to

follow Dr. Li wherever he went. He nodded to himself and moved forward. He crouched and waited until the figures on shore had all entered the boat. Then, as the boat pushed off, he ran forward in a low crouch to catch hold and be towed across the river.

He was near the boat, about to slip silently into the river, when a voice called urgently from the hill above. A voice that shouted in Chinese.

Napoleon Solo crouched at the edge of the river.

A blinding light suddenly went on in the stern of the boat.

The river and the shore were illuminated like day.

Solo crouched in the full glare of the light—a strange figure in evening clothes with a pistol in his hand.

There were shouts from both the boat and the hill above.

Solo was caught. He could not follow the boat now. He turned swiftly and dove into the cover of the bushes. But he knew how slim his chances were. He was blocked from the river, and they were all over the hill above him. It would be almost impossible to get up the hill without being seen or heard.

But he had done the impossible before.

Low, he moved carefully through the bushes and up the hill at an angle to the left. It was the most dangerous path, and the one they would least expect him to take. He hoped it was the one they would least expect.

He heard them all around him in the night. They had lights. Which meant that they could not look for long: the patrols of the Hong Kong Colony would see them.

All he had to do was reach the flat land near the road. Then he—

Napoleon Solo froze. Three Communist soldiers stood directly in his path. In the next instant they saw him. He hurled himself into thicker cover as they opened fire.

Bullets clipped the brush, snapped and crackled like a swarm of angry wasps over his head. On his belly he crawled and fell into a deep depression. His left arm burned and he realized that he had been hit. The fall into the depression twisted his ankle, the pain sharp through the ankle.

But he crawled on along the depression that had turned out to be a small and almost totally hidden gully. He heard the noise of his attackers fading behind him. He smiled, and started to rise to test his ankle.

A Red soldier stood directly above the ditch a few feet from him. The soldier looked down, rifle pointed. Solo raised his pistol.

"You wouldn't have time, Napoleon," a voice said. "*Tsk, tsk.* You botched this one."

Solo slowly lowered his pistol. The soldier jumped down into the ditch. A small, slender man with black Chinese hair, and Oriental

eyes, and a yellowish skin and the clipped accents of a British-trained voice.

"Illya!" Solo said. "How did—?"

"Waverly contacted me, of course. I rather expected you to make some dazzling approach. You disappointed me," Illya Kuryakin said. The small, Russian, Number Two man of U.N.C.L.E. Section II grinned through his Chinese disguise. "Is that small man Dr. Li?"

"I followed him here."

"Well, he's over the border now. So at least we know that he is defecting back to the Reds."

"I've got to follow him," Solo said.

"Not now. They're all watching for you. I'll have to take over. Report to Waverly that—"

The small, disguised Russian stopped. Solo listened, too. Trucks were coming along the dirt road.

"The Hong Kong patrols," Illya said. "Scream!"

"What?" Solo said.

"Scream—loud! Make it good. Gurgle, too."

Napoleon Solo screamed.

Illya fired his rifle three times, grunted some vicious oath in Chinese, and leaped to the top of the gully. Solo screamed again, groaned, and lay in the gully.

Feet pounded in the night. Solo heard the other Red soldiers run up. He heard gutteral words in Chinese, and heard Illya tell the others that he, Illya, had killed the spy—the dog of a spy. One voice wanted to look—the officer, no doubt. Solo tensed. Then he heard Illya say that a man hit three times does not live—and the Hong Kong patrols were approaching.

There was a tense moment, and then the Red soldiers moved away toward the river. Solo waited for a few minutes, then stood and climbed out of the gully. In an instant he was surrounded by men in British uniforms.

"Hold it! Right there!"

Solo raised his hands. Lights shone on him and revealed him in his evening clothes. Solo smiled politely.

"I seem to have lost my way," the U.N.C.L.E. agent said. "Is there a party around somewhere?"

They stood and stared at him.

THREE

THE HONG KONG headquarters of U.N.C.L.E. are on Victoria Street in Kennedy Town, on the island of Hong Kong itself. They are hidden behind the simple facade of an Indian restaurant. There is an actual restaurant on the first floor, operated by a real Indian from Bombay, who is also the second-in-command of U.N.C.L.E. in the area.

The second floor, which is a storage area, is actually not the second floor at all. It is the third floor. The second floor does not exist.

Except that it does exist, and

is the actual headquarters complex. It contains the communications rooms, the file rooms, the weapons rooms, and all the other materiel of an U.N.C.L.E. area headquarters, and it is entered through a closet in the kitchen of the restaurant.

The closet is a clever and highly secret elevator. No one who entered the elevator could ever leave it without complete identification. It opens into a small reception room where the receptionist, a beautiful Chinese girl, is armed with two pistols and a button that closes all doors and releases a sleep gas.

Just behind this reception area is a small and neat office. This is the special office reserved for the members of Section I, the ultimate leaders of U.N.C.L.E. At this moment the special room was doubly in use—two Section-I men were there: Alexander Waverly, from New York; and Kalil Rajit Singh, from Calcutta. Two of the five men

who ran U.N.C.L.E., and with them was Napoleon Solo.

"I suppose it couldn't be helped, Mr. Solo," Waverly said, "but it was a bit embarrassing with the Hong Kong authorities."

Solo suppressed a grin. The Hong Kong officials had had a bad time with the agent-in-evening-dress caught at the border. There were probably a lot of confused junior officers after Solo was quietly and discreetly spirited away and turned over to U.N.C.L.E.

"At least, Alexander, we know that Dr. Li has defected, and your agent Kuryakin is close to him," Kalil Rajit Singh said.

Waverly frowned. "That will not be enough, I'm afraid, Kalil."

The New York Chief of U.N.C.L.E. puffed on his pipe. The pipe was out, and Waverly began to search his pockets for a match. His iron grey hair, and frowning face, gave him the appearance of an ageing bloodhound. Which in a way he was: he had spent his life in the work of espionage and counter-espionage, for his native country and later for U.N.C.L.E. But he was also the brilliant mind that had conceived much of the methodology of U.N.C.L.E.

"One man cannot operate inside China efficiently," Waverly went on. "No, we must activate plan two for Mr. Solo."

Solo gave his gruff Chief a lighter. Waverly lighted his pipe, puffing speculatively.

"So far, Kalil, it is all happening as you suspected," Waverly said.

The serious Indian Section-I man nodded. "I had, as I explained, definite word that Li Po Shue was going to return to the mainland and throw in his lot with the Reds after all these years. It seems he had decided that the future of China does lie with Mao's Government."

"He may be right," Waverly said. "But that is beside the point now. You're sure of your information, Kalil?"

"Absolutely," Kalil Singh said.

Solo broke in. "But, we know Li has gone back! We know he is inside China now. I saw—"

Kalil Singh shook his head. "No, Mr. Solo, Li Po Shue is not inside Red China. And he never will be."

Solo blinked. "Not inside—"

Waverly puffed smoke into the quiet office. "We have reason to think that Dr. Li Po Shue is dead, Mr. Solo."

"Dead?" Solo said, gaped. "But I followed him all last night!"

"No. You followed an impostor, Mr. Solo," Kalil Singh said. "We thought that, but it was better that neither you nor Mr. Kuryakin know that we knew, in case you were caught. I have all but conclusive information that the real Dr. Li is dead, killed by those who supplied the carbon copy of him."

"In short, killed by THRUSH," Waverly said quietly. "Yes, their

fine hand is behind it. I take it the impostor was very good?"

"Perfect," Solo said. "I'd studied Dr. Li in films for weeks. He fooled me, and everyone else at the party."

"Including men who have known Li Po Shue for many years," Kalil Singh said. "THRUSH is an efficient organization, as we all know."

"We believe the impostor is one of their top men, perhaps even a Council member," Waverly said. "In fact, we know a great deal. What we don't know, I'm afraid, is *why?* THRUSH does not go to so much trouble without a good reason. The question is, what are they up to?"

"Dr. Li would be welcomed with open arms," Solo said. "He'd probably be given a high job."

"Without question," Waverly said.

"But not a top job," Kalil Singh said. "He would not be trusted at a policy level, never. No, he would be *used*. They will put him in some position where his skill can be used by the Mao regime, and where the eyes of the world would be on him. They would want to exploit his return to mainland China."

"Yes, I'm sure they would," Waverly said thoughtfully.

Solo rubbed his chin and looked at the two Section-I men. His arm still hurt from where the bullet had grazed, and his ankle was heavily taped, but he could walk on it, and he was anxious to get back to work. Illya Kuryakin was alone somewhere deep in the heart of China.

"But Dr. Li is a politician, a diplomat," Solo said. "Where could they use him except at the policy level?"

"That is what we must learn, Mr. Solo," Kalil Singh said. "Or, rather, what you must learn."

Waverly studied his pipe, which had gone out. The chief knitted his bushy eyebrows. "You see, Mr. Solo, Dr. Li is a diplomat, a vice president of National China, but he is, or was, also a noted electronic scientist. As a matter of fact he is, or was, a specialist on ballistic missile guidance systems."

"You think the Reds want to use him to develop ballistic missiles now that they have atomic capability?" Solo said.

"Almost certainly, Mr. Solo," Waverly said drily. "That is what the Red Chinese would do with Dr. Li—but they do not have Dr. Li. So the question is what does THRUSH want to do with the false Dr. Li? It is highly doubtful that an impostor is as expert as Dr. Li was. I think our impostor would not be able to develop missile systems, but he probably knows enough about them to get by."

"Which leaves us still in the dark as to THRUSH's purpose," Kalil Singh said. "They have gone to much trouble to get a man into China at a high level."

"And THRUSH never goes to trouble without a lot to gain," Napoleon Solo said. "I think I better get into China this time."

"I think you had better, Mr. Solo. The last report from Mr. Kuryakin indicated that he was still in the unit assigned to Dr. Li, and is in Peking. He is doing what he can, but in his present disguise he is somewhat limited. We must have a man who can get close to Dr. Li," Waverly said.

"You want Plan Two for China entry?" Solo said.

"I think Plan Two, yes. Your Albanian is now good enough?" Waverly said.

"I've been working with the knowledge accelerator for a month," Solo said. "I wouldn't fool an Albanian for long, but I think I can play the part of the missile expert."

Kalil Singh frowned. "It will be risky, Alexander. Perhaps I have a Section-II man who is fluent in Albanian."

"The Chinese have few who speak Albanian, Kalil," Waverly said. "No, we need our best man, and Mr. Solo is probably that. He will know enough Albanian to convince the Chinese, and then he can use French, English or Russian, which most of the leaders know. He also speaks four or five Chinese dialects, which will be vital in learning what is going on."

Kalil Singh nodded. "Very well, Alexander. I will have the section prepare the proper papers, and arrange the route."

"Do that, Kalil," Waverly said, and looked at Solo as he sucked on his cold pipe. "By tonight, Mr. Solo will be the Albanian missile expert en route to Peking by way of Kabul."

Solo grinned. "Let's hope I make it."

"Yes, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "Let us hope you do better than you did in crossing the Sham Chun River."

Solo's grin weakened, but the boyish agent shrugged, and left the secret room to begin the arduous preparations that would make him an Albanian missile expert.

FOUR

PEKING IS AN old city. It has seen many wars and has had many names. A city of walls, it has, under the rule of The People's Republic, expanded far beyond the northern Inner City and the southern Outer City. Residential suburbs sprawl to the north and northwest here at the apex of the north China plain. The universities have risen beyond the ancient walls, and industrial centers smoke and hum a few feet from ancient statues of the times of long forgotten emperors.

In the city there are six artificial lakes fed from a moat outside the walls of the Inner City. Grouped around the Chung Hai (Middle Lake) and Nan Hai (South lake)

are the buildings of the Chinese People's Government. It was here, on a dark night a few days after Napoleon Solo had been frustrated at the border, that three black cars drove silently up to one of the government buildings.

The cars stopped and three men stepped out of the second car. One of these men was the small Dr. Li Po Shue. The other two were men in the uniforms of People's Republic generals. The three entered the building through a small side door.

From the other two cars a group of people emerged. Most were soldiers, armed and alert as they watched in all directions along the dark street. From time to time there were loud noises, the shouts of many voices, from the direction of the old Legation Quarter where there were now many hotels, stores, theaters and movie houses.

"The Red Guards are active again," one of the soldiers said to his companion.

The companion, a small, dark man, answered in the same northern dialect. "They have nothing to do, comrade."

But this small man was not really listening to his fellow soldier. He was watching the door through which Dr. Li had gone with the generals, and he was watching a group of three men and a woman who had stepped out of the first car.

Illya Kuryakin stared at the woman and three men. There was something familiar about them. But Illya could not for the moment place them, and he again turned his attention to the small door. Somehow, he had to get inside.

But there was no way without risking his disguise. Still, he was about to take that chance, when the door opened again, and the small figure of Dr. Li came out with the two generals. Behind them, inside the doorway, Illya had a glimpse of another man—a heavy-set man with a round moon face who was only too familiar!

Illya stared at the half hidden figure of Chairman Mao himself!

Only for a moment; then the Chinese ruler was gone. But in that glimpse Illya had realized that Dr. Li Po Shue was not operating at a low level. The chairman had waved once, as if to wish Dr. Li luck in whatever he was to do.

Illya had time to see no more. The leaders and soldiers climbed back into their cars and the three car motorcade drove off again in the dark night. Soon they were driving through more crowded streets where the mobs of young and eager Red Guards chanted and shouted their devotion to the new way.

The cars drove out of the walled cities, through the brighter streets of shops and theaters, and into the newer suburbs where the factories operated even now at night. They passed the main railroad terminus, and continued on into complete in-

dustrial areas, and then into the more open land far to the north.

At last the three cars pulled up before a large, dark building that stood isolated beside a double railroad spur. The generals and Dr. Li got out and walked into the building. The soldiers were dispersed to guard. The group of three men and a woman, all non-Chinese, followed Dr. Li and the generals into the building.

Illya Kuryakin walked his post at the western corner of the giant building. His keen eyes watched, and his mind analyzed the situation. His post was distant from the entrance to the vast building. The guards were not walking post, and not reporting. They were simply on watch. The officer was lounging against one of the cars.

Illya studied the facade of the building. It appeared to be a warehouse, and a row of windows ran some six feet up all along the walls. Illya looked again toward the officer. The man was lighting a cigarette, talking to a sergeant. Illya decided to risk leaving his post.

He moved quickly to the wall of the building, and took two small, round objects from under his uniform. He wet them, and struck them firmly against the wall. They stuck fast, and each one had a four inch metal bar that folded out into a projection. Illya climbed onto them and his shoulders reached above the bottom of the windows.

The small Russian U.N.C.L.E. agent quickly cut a hole in a window pane with a tiny diamond-tipped cutter, reached in, opened the window, climbed through and dropped to the floor. He crouched in the dark interior and listened. There was no sound.

His eyes grew accustomed to the dark. He saw that he was in a smallish store room of some type. There were crates piled to the ceiling. Illya examined the crates and found that they contained submachine gun ammunition, and were destined, according to the *Russian* lettering, for Viet Nam!

That the Soviet was supplying Viet Nam by way of China was not news, and Illya crossed the room to the door. He listened. He heard voices—but far away, indistinct, and strangely echoing. Cautiously he tried the door. It was not locked. He opened it a crack and looked out.

What he saw made him mutter in sudden surprise.

The area he looked into was as high and large as an aircraft hanger. It was most of the building, and the railroad tracks ran into it from the outside. It was dim, but with just enough light for Illya to see the generals and Dr. Li deep in conference on the far side.

And enough light for him to see the two giant rocket-missiles that rested on railroad flat cars in the center of the vast building.

Illya knew instantly what they were. Soviet-made, IRBM mis-

siles (Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles). Powerful, accurate, with a range of some 1500 miles, perhaps more, and full atomic capability!

But why?

Illya stared out at the rockets. The relations between the Soviet Union and China was not such that the Russians would send missiles to China!

Then why were they here in Peking?

Illya let his deep-set eyes carefully survey the giant warehouse room, and then crept out and moved quickly toward the rockets. He reached them unseen, and moved along beneath the towering flat cars.

He found what he wanted near the tall tail assembly.

In Russian there was a simple legend: *Depot 14, Hanoi.*

The same was repeated in Vietnamese and Chinese.

The IRBM's were destined for the Hanoi Government of Ho Chi Minh. Which was a dangerous escalation of the Viet Nam War! With such missiles, Hanoi could threaten the whole free-world in Asia!

And yet—Hanoi had no atomic warheads!

Still, as a token of Soviet faith in Hanoi, the IRBM's with conventional warheads would be dangerous weapons that could be used on Saigon as a morale-shattering attack.

They could be used on the

American Fleet off the Viet Namese shore!

Illya felt rather than saw the man behind him. He tensed, waited, his ears alert. There was a soft step close behind, a pause, and then he sensed the lunge.

Illya dived aside, turned in mid-air, his pistol in his hand.

The man wore civilian clothes and carried a knife. He was still in the act of plunging the knife into Illya's back—but Illya was no longer there. The man had time to open his mouth and no more.

Illya's silent shot struck the man full in the throat. The man dropped without a sound. Illya crawled to the fallen man, already dead from the deadly poisoned dart Illya had loaded in his pistol for this mission.

Illa searched the body quickly. He found the identity card. A Chinese secret policeman! Illya bent and picked up the man. He carried him silently through the giant ware-

house to the small storage room. He hid the body inside a packing case.

The man would not be found for some days.

Illya turned to climb back through the window.

He stopped.

There was sudden loud noise back inside the main room of the warehouse. Illya returned to the door. The two giant IRBMs were being moved out by a small switch engine. Dr. Li and the two Chinese generals were watching.

Illya went back across the small storeroom and climbed up and out the window. He dropped to the ground, took his two suction disks from the wall, and returned to his post.

All was quiet. Illya smiled, and bent over his ring radio.

FIVE

NAPOLEON SOLO rode down Chatham Road in Kowloon to the Peninsula Hotel. He left the taxi a block from the hotel and walked the rest of the way. He did not go in the main entrance, but went down an alley at the side and into the side door.

He went up the service stairs until he reached the third floor. There he stepped carefully out into a corridor, surveyed the deserted hall, and walked quickly to a room where he let himself in with a key.

Inside the room he locked the door behind him, smiled, and sat down at a table. A makeup kit was already on the table. The room had been rented in the name of Mehemet Shenhu, a supposed member of an Albanian Mission to Hong Kong who had remained in the Crown Colony when his mission left for Tokyo.

Mehemet Shenhu was, of course, an U.N.C.L.E. agent in Tirana, and Solo was to return to the Albanian capital in his place. Once there he would fly out as the Albanian expert on missiles, and be in Peking in a day and a half.

He glued on the drooping mustache, darkened his hair, carefully thickened his nose, and sat back to study the effect. He grinned. His own mother would not know him. With a red *fez*, since he was a Muslim, and a baggy Albanian suit, he would pass.

He checked his watch. In twenty minutes he would leave the hotel to catch his jet. He checked his weapons and the secret devices every U.N.C.L.E. agent carried for any emergency that might arise.

The audible alarm on his pencil radio began to sound.

Solo answered. "Sonny here, come in Control Central."

Waverly's voice was calm, yet urgent for the slow-speaking chief. "Mr. Solo, we have just received a relayed report from Mr. Kuryakin. He reports that Dr. Li appears involved in some action concerning Soviet IRBM missiles. These mis-

siles are in Peking, and seem to be destined for Hanoi."

"Soviet missiles in China and going to Hanoi?" Solo said, his voice surprised. "That doesn't sound logical."

"No, Mr. Solo, it does not sound logical. I cannot see what interest THRUSH would have in such a matter, in any event. It is now urgent that you reach Peking quickly. We must find out what is really behind those missiles!"

"Roger," Solo said. "I'm leaving in ten minutes."

"Very good. You will be met in Tirana, the usual recognition signals plus the code for the day: *The Red Guard is active,* and the reply. *It's a full moon.*"

"Roger," Solo said.

His pencil radio went silent. The boyish agent frowned for a moment. Waverly was right, there was something more behind this than missiles for Hanoi, some scheme of THRUSH that would be more deadly than any missiles in Hanoi.

He looked at his watch. It was time. His pistol in place, the thermite foil and the smoke bombs concealed, Solo left the room a different man than the agent who had entered.

In his red *fez* and disguise he rode down in the elevator and checked out.

He saw them as he crossed the lobby.

Three men, Europeans, casually blocking the door. The bulge of a weapon was clear beneath the tropical suit coat of the tallest. Without breaking stride, Solo turned to the left and entered the hotel bar. He stopped and ordered a martini. The three men were in the doorway into the bar. Solo laid money on the bar and left his suitcase. He walked to the men's room. Once in the men's room he unlocked the second door he knew was there and went out, into the alley.

He walked casually up the alley.

Two more men stood at the exit from the alley. Solo turned back before they saw him. Now it was clear that they had all exits covered, the other end of the alley would be locked also. Midway along the alley he spotted a door into the next building. It was locked.

He used his concealed picklock and went inside.

He stood in a corridor of some kind. He could hear the sound of office machine and typewriters. He concentrated and remembered that the ground floor of the building was occupied by a travel agency.

He was apparently in a storage area.

Cautiously he moved along the dim corridor until he came to where it opened, without a door, into a large office, where pretty girls typed or talked to customers at a long counter. As he was about

to step out he saw the three men come into the travel agency.

He flattened against the wall of the corridor.

He tried to recall the layout of the building. There should be another exit at the street side on the street behind the Peninsula Hotel. He turned and went back along the corridor until he came to a cross corridor.

He was halfway along this cross corridor toward what he was sure was a fire door that could only be opened from the inside, when a door suddenly opened beside him.

Napoleon Solo whirled, his U.N.C.L.E. Special in his hand.

Something stung his neck.

A light, minute pricking of his neck.

Solo froze with his pistol in his hand, and then there was nothing at all. A black void into which Solo seemed to fall down and down with faces grinning at him.

ACT II

THE HAWK OR THE PIGEON?

NAPOLEON SOLO came awake slowly. First the black void seemed to grow lighter, turn grey and then a pale white. He did not open his eyes.

He tested his muscles, moved his arms and then his feet. He was not paralyzed or bound. He seemed to be seated on some hard surface. A metal chair of some kind.

Ready, Solo opened his eyes.

He was in a bright room with flat grey walls. There were no doors or windows. There seemed to be no ceiling. He saw two men across the room with their backs to him. To their left he saw a man and a woman. No one was watching him!

He gathered his muscles and leaped sideways out of the metal chair.

Only he did not leap.

A horrible pain struck his back and his legs and he sprawled in a heap on the floor. He ground his teeth against the pain. Slowly it eased, and Solo opened his eyes again and looked up. They were all standing over him with guns in their hands.

The woman laughed. "How do you like our new chair, Napoleon?"

"Very nice," Solo said from the floor.

He looked up at the woman. "Hello, Maxine. We do seem to run into each other."

"You're my favorite assignment, Napoleon dear," Maxine Trent said. She waved her pistol to the three men with her. "Put him back into the chair."

Solo was lifted and placed back into the chair. He looked at it with interest. It did not appear to have any wires. Maxine smiled. The tall, beautiful THRUSH agent waved her pistol at the chair.

"One of our little toys, Napo-

leon," Maxine said. "No wires, no ropes, no messy drugs. But if you try to get up it knocks you down. I can also control it, see?"

The agonizing pain shot through Solo's legs and up into his body. The agent cried out, and twisted in the metal chair. The pain went away, and Solo sat there sweating in the grey-walled room that had no windows, door or furniture other than the metal chair itself.

"So you know you can't escape. Right, Napoleon?" Maxine said.

"I know I can't escape," Solo said.

"Good," the violet-eyed Maxine said, her six-foot frame, with all the curves exactly where they should be, bending toward Solo. "Then you will tell us all you know about Dr. Li Po Shue."

"Doctor who Po what?" Solo said innocently.

Maxine sighed. "Really, Napoleon, give us some credit. We trapped you like a chicken in a net. We know that Waverly and Kalil Singh are both here in Hong Kong. They don't come to an area headquarters unless they know something important is happening. We know that you watched, and followed, Dr. Li as far as the Sham Chun River. So, you know something. Now we want to know what it is."

"Waverly and Kalil Singh here?" Solo said. "I really wish people would tell me what's going on. I—"

The agonizing pain contorted Solo's body again. When it ceased he sat shivering with sweat. Then he smiled.

"You know better than this, Maxine. What will your superiors say if they hear you're trying such crude methods?"

Maxine nodded. "Of course, I'm just, shall we say, softening you up. And I have no superiors, Napoleon. This one is all mine."

Solo raised an eyebrow. "Yours? Are you on the Council now, Maxie?"

"Just about, dear Napoleon. They've moved me way up, thanks partly to you," Maxine said proudly.

"To me? Well, I'm glad to be of service," Solo said.

"You defeated so many area leaders, killed off so many of our people. They had to move me up, I'm still going. Survival and success, that's how to get ahead."

"In THRUSH?"

"Anywhere, Napoleon. Now I have my own area, and the Dr. Li project is all mine. But I must know what U.N.C.L.E. knows, or thinks they know. I won't offer you a chance to join us again, although I could do a lot to start you off high up now, Napoleon."

"Don't offer, Maxine. I'm afraid the way of getting ahead in THRUSH makes it a bit too dangerous as a career," Solo said.

"We're simply realists, Napoleon. You in U.N.C.L.E. tend to be

sentimental. That's why we'll win in the end."

"With Dr. Li and those missiles?" Solo said.

Maxine nodded. "Yes, with those miss . . ."

The tall beautiful woman stopped. Behind her the three men muttered. Maxine stared at Solo with a coldness now in her violet eyes.

"Tricks, Napoleon? So, you know that we are concerned with those missiles, but I now know that you have at least connected Dr. Li to the missiles. Now you will tell me everything that you know, and Waverly knows."

"You know I won't, Maxine," Solo said with a grin, but his eyes as firm as Maxine's eyes.

The tall, beautiful woman watched Solo for a moment with those violet eyes Solo had once seen under better conditions. Then she, too, smiled. She waved to her men. As if this was a signal they had been waiting for, the three sprung into action.

One went behind Napoleon Solo and wheeled out a tape recorder.

The other two left the grey room. Solo watched them. He saw a portion of the wall open as if by itself. The men went through and the wall closed. Solo had not seen them touch anything. The exit was apparently operated completely from the outside. Which meant that somewhere in the walls was a one-way window through which the room was under observation.

"Progress is a wonderful thing, Napoleon. Don't you agree?" Maxine said.

"I'm all for it," Solo said. "I gather you're trying to tell me something."

"I am, Napoleon. You see, I know that your subconscious is programmed to answer only gibberish under a trust serum, and I know, of course, that torture will probably not work. Our Council knows that, too."

"So?" Solo said warily.

"So we've come up with an answer. We've made progress," Maxine said.

The wall opened again and the two men returned. They carried a small bottle and a hypodermic. Solo looked at the bottle and hypodermic. The two men began to prepare the syringe.

Maxine watched them, smiled at Solo. "You see, Napoleon, your programming works because the truth serums short-circuit your conscious mind and bring the subconscious up. You lose conscious control. The problem was to find a way to make you want to tell us, you see?"

"A nice trick if you can do it," Solo said.

"But we have," Maxine said. "It's really quite beautiful. This little drug won't hurt you at all. It leaves you in perfect control, conscious, sane, fully awake, even

cheerful. Your subconscious never even becomes aware of what's happening, so the programming doesn't operate, see?"

"And just what is happening?" Solo said.

"Why, you're telling us everything we want to know—of your own free will!" Maxine said. "Or, to be accurate, without your will. You see, the drug saps your will, it makes you love us, want to tell us what we ask."

"I doubt it," Solo said.

"Really? Well, suppose we find out, eh?" Maxine said.

The tall woman nodded to her men. One turned on the tape recorder. The other two stepped to Solo. The agent felt the needle go in. The other men stepped back. The man on the tape recorder bent over his dials. Maxine watched intently.

"What does Waverly know about Dr. Li Po Shue?" Maxine said softly.

Solo opened his mouth to laugh. The laugh did not come. He felt a sudden wave of peace, of quiet. Maxine looked very lovely. He smiled at Maxine. He felt limp, almost jelly, and yet was aware of Maxine and the others. They were pleasant people.

"I won't—" Solo began.

He knew that he must not tell. The question was not one that could be answered. But . . .

"Waverly knows that Dr. Li Po Shue is dead," Solo said.

"Where is the man who says he is Dr. Li?"

"In Peking," Solo said, aware of what he said, aware that he must not say it, yet unable not to say it.

"How did you learn that?"

"Our key man in Peking, he sent a lengthy—"

Solo talked on. The tape recorder wound slowly taking down all the words of the helpless agent.

TWO

ALEXANDER WAVERLY and Kalil Singh sat in the secret room of the Hong Kong Headquarters of U.N.C.L.E. and continued to plan and analyze the situation of Dr. Li Po Shue.

"Solo should report in shortly," Waverly said. "We can give him the latest news on the real Dr. Li."

"Yes," Kalil Singh said. "There is no doubt that the real Dr. Li is dead, and that he was in THRUSH hands before he died. I think—"

A bell sounded suddenly in the Section-I room, low and urgent. Kalil Singh sat up straight and rigid. Waverly pressed a button.

"Yes, Waverly here!"

"Security officer Tanaka," a voice snapped. "I am receiving a

sensor warning signal, Code Six drug alarm."

"From which agent?" Waverly snapped.

"Agent Napoleon Solo," the security officer replied.

"Wait there! Kalil!" Waverly said quickly.

Kalil Singh was already at the door of the secret Section-I room. The Indian and Waverly walked swiftly along the quiet corridor of the hidden headquarters to a sealed door. They presented their badges to the scanner, and held up their hands. There was a momentary pause. Waverly fumbled for his pipe, nervous. Then the door slid open, their identification checked and found proper.

Inside the room a tall Japanese man sat at an intricate console. The Japanese, security officer Tanaka, did not speak but simply pointed to his console where a small red light glowed. There was no other light on his board.

"How long has it been signaling?" Kalil Sigh asked.

"About two minutes and ten seconds," Tanaka said. "I may have missed a few seconds. It is the first time we've used the device in this—"

"Very well," Waverly snapped, his brooding eyes riveted to the little red light. "Send for the communications officer, quickly!"

Tanaka made the call. Then the tall Japanese turned to look at Waverly.

"He will be here in ten seconds, sir."

Waverly nodded, searching for a match for his pipe, his gaze still fixed on the small red light.

"Exactly how does it work, sir?" Tanaka said. "As I said, it is new to me."

Waverly said nothing. Kalil Singh spoke.

"It is a small sensor electrode implanted in the brain of the agent. When the agent is administered some drug that makes him talk against his will, or against his programming, the sensor sends out an immediate signal that can be picked up for fifty miles. We are working on a better range," the Indian said.

"So this means that Solo is capured and talking?" Tanaka said.

"I'm afraid it does," Kalil Singh said.

"Ah," Waverly said as a small Chinese entered the room. "You are the communications officer?"

"Dr. Ch'en Wu," Kalil Singh said.

"I want an immediate fix on the source of the signal that is lighting that light," Waverly said.

The Chinese U.N.C.L.E. agent looked at the light. "A brain sensor beam?"

"Yes—and hurry, man!" Waverly said.

"Immediately, sir," Dr. Ch'en Wu said.

The Chinese agent turned and left the room at a run. Kalil Singh

watched the red light. Waverly smoked. The Indian Section-I leader coughed lightly. Waverly looked up at him.

"Perhaps we had better alert anyone involved," Kalil Singh said.

"Alert?" Waverly said.

"He is talking, Alexander," the Indian said. "We must change all security here and in New York. Alert all personnel he has knowledge about. There is no way of knowing just what they will ask. Luckily, he knows little about the operation here."

Waverly nodded. "Forgive me, Kalil. I apologize. Of course, we must alert Mr. Kuryakin immediately! Anyone else. Tanaka, you have Mr. Solo's file. Examine it and put all security measures into effect. But first get the word through to Mr. Kuryakin, he must change his disguise and cover!"

The door opened again and the small Chinese communications officer came back. "The location of the source is ten miles from here, sir, in a warehouse on the docks on Canton Road. The height appears to indicate the third floor. I have the security agents alerted and ready. There is a truck and a car."

"Good," Waverly said. "Come!"

The grey-haired Chief moved with amazing speed as he led the forces of U.N.C.L.E. out of their secret headquarters and into the truck and the car.

The truck and car moved swiftly through the city. Waverly looked at his watch. Less than four minutes had passed since he had been alerted. A total of some seven minutes in all since the signal had first come in. They would not have had time to ask all their questions by far.

Or would they?

Perhaps they had not wanted more than the few facts U.N.C.L.E. knew about Dr. Li Po Shue. If so, they could have picked Solo's mind clean by now, and disposed of him.

Waverly's bushy brows knotted grimly. *No.* THRUSH, with Napoleon Solo in their hands and helpless, would not be able to resist learning everything they could.

A faint smile flickered across the impassive face of the U.N.C.L.E. leader. Waverly had made the study of THRUSH a large part of his life's work, and he knew the one great weakness of that secret and powerful organization—the violent internal competition and greed for personal position.

THRUSH believed that this internal struggle was their strength, but it was actually their weakness because it made them lose sight of the true purpose. And Waverly was sure that whoever had Solo would lose sight of the immediate purpose and want to learn *all* Solo knew in order to have as many of U.N.C.L.E.'s secrets as possible—personally.

Waverly hoped that this was true—it might be all that would save Napoleon Solo this time.

"There it is, Alexander," Kalil Singh said quietly.

Waverly nodded and looked out at the silent warehouse at the edge of Victoria Harbor. Then, quickly, he gave his calm, precise orders to his men. They listened, nodded, and began to slip along the quiet street toward the warehouse.

THREE

EVENING HAD COME again to Peking, and Illya Kuryakin stood at rigid attention in the spartan office inside the grim Government building. To any observer, Kuryakin, in his disguise as a soldier of the People's Army, was a picture of correct discipline. But his shrewd, quick eyes missed nothing of the meeting in the office.

Dr. Li Pŏ Shue was seated across the desk from the small, soft-eyed woman who looked like a pleasant Chinese grandmother but who was, in fact, neither pleasant nor soft. She probably was a grandmother, though, Illya thought. The Communist women leaders made something of a fetish of being normal women, and grandmothers seemed to make excellent second-in-command bureaucrats.

This one Illya knew only too well—Madame Chu Ting, widow of General Chu Ting, and closest aide to Madame Mao herself. One of the Communists' strongest assets—the unknown, quiet, non-ambitious second-line leaders who let their chiefs take all the public attention and public risk. Without such second-line leaders, Communism would have drowned in its own turmoil long ago. The strength of Communism was not its Chou en Lai's, its Molotovs, or its Stalins, but its Kaganovitches, its Mikoyans, and its Madame Chus.

"You can prepare the intermediate missiles for immediate operational installation, Dr. Li?" Madame Chu said quietly.

"Yes," Dr. Li said simply.

"Good," Madame Chu said. "We are very fortunate to have you with us, Dr. Li."

"I belong where my country's destiny lies, Madame," Dr. Li said. "It is now clear to me where that is."

The other two silent men in the room seemed to watch Dr. Li with more than a little suspicion. Illya Kuryakin, rigid and remote as he was supposed to be, a creature without eyes or ears, studied the two other men.

They were a puzzle. One was General Teng Tu'Sian, a known proponent of Mao and properly here. But the other was General Po Soong Teh, a strong opponent of Mao. What were the two generals doing together here? Watching each other? Unsure of just where Dr. Li would stand, and so each group wanting a man with the Nationalist defector?

And where did THRUSH fit in?

Did anyone in this room know that Dr. Li was not Dr. Li but a THRUSH impostor? If so, which side, and why? Illya did not have time to get an answer.

"It is always good to have one's destiny clear," General Po said drily. "But I suggest we begin. Speed is essential in this matter."

"For once we agree," General Teng said. The Mao-man nodded to the anti-Mao General Po. "Time is our most important factor now. We must impress the Americans with our atomic delivery potential."

"And our Russian comrades, General?" General Po said.

"The revisionist Russians need impressing, General," Teng answered.

The two generals stared at each other for a moment. Then Po, of the anti-Mao party, shrugged. "At least, this is only a matter for experts. I think we can leave it to Dr. Li."

"We agree," Madame Chu snapped.

With that the conference broke up. Illya followed Dr. Li out of the spartan office, but his mind was busy. So far it all appeared normal. Dr. Li was the expert, the presence of the two generals seemed to indicate that the matter of the missiles was not open to debate. Yet, where was THRUSH's interest, and why were the Chinese so concerned with Soviet missiles to be used in Hanoi?

Illya was puzzled, but he had little time to think as Dr. Li immediately entered his car and the guards had to enter their truck. Illya climbed into the truck with the others.

The two-car motorcade wound through the dark Peking streets. Illya now began to wonder what had become of the third car, the one with the four unidentified Europeans in it. He had a strong suspicion that the four had some connection with THRUSH.

Soon, Illya sensed that the car of Dr. Li was returning to the general area of the warehouse where the missiles had been. But they did not stop at the warehouse. Instead the car and truck drove on some two miles farther and pulled up at the edge of the railroad line.

The two flatcars sat on a siding, the missiles heavily covered and disguised. There were no lights on in the now dark night. The car of Dr. Li stopped, and the truck stopped behind it. The officer ordered all the soldiers off, and stationed them all around the perimeter of the area.

Suddenly two large flat-car trailer trucks appeared—each with a double trailer and the special cradles and slings Illya Kuryakin recognized at once were for transporting missiles!

Men appeared from nowhere, and a large crane car began to move up the tracks toward the missiles. It was obvious that they were

about to transfer the missiles from the railroad cars to the trucks!

Which could mean only one thing—the Soviet missiles, intended for Hanoi, were not going to go to Hanoi! The missiles were being diverted!

Why and where?

Was this the move THRUSH had been planning?

Yet the move could not be hidden; the Chinese must be aware of it, a part of it. They were stealing the Soviet missiles!

At that instant Illya felt the sudden heat in the breast pocket of his uniform jacket. A quick burning sensation.

He looked around. No one was watching him. A few feet away there was a small railroad storage shack. Illya moved to the shack and crouched behind it.

He reached into his breast pocket and brought out his pencil. The pencil clip was glowing red with its visual alarm. Illya pressed the clip and whispered into the pencil-radio.

"Bubba here. Come in Control. Bubba here. Over."

A clipped female voice spoke quietly in the Peking night.

"Hong Kong Control to Bubba. Mayday. Your cover exposed. Repeat, Mayday: your cover exposed. Implement alternate cover immediately. Repeat: implement alternate cover immediately! Acknowledge."

"Bubba affirmative. Cover exposed, implementing alternate cover at once. Report Soviet missiles being diverted from Hanoi destination. New destination and purpose unknown."

"Roger, Bubba. Over and out."

Illya Kuryakin stared for a moment at the small, silent pencil. How had his cover been blown? Only Waverly, Kalil Singh, and Solo knew. Solo? The small Russian shivered. If they had made Napoleon talk, what had happened to him?

Thinking of his friend, Illya was almost too late.

As he stepped out of the cover of the railroad shack, he saw an American-made jeep suddenly come tearing up the road toward the group around Dr. Li. A sixth sense told him that this was danger. The jeep skidded to a halt, and two men in civilian clothes ran to the small Nationalist defector. Illya Kuryakin knew secret police when he saw them.

He turned on his heel and began to walk slowly off into the night. He did not run; that would have caught the eyes of the other guards instantly. He walked, and directly ahead, some fifty yards away, a factory complex began.

Illya studied it as he continued to walk slowly, calmly.

There were four buildings, mounds of slag, a great litter of steel shapes. It was a steel plant, a place easy to become lost in. All he had to do was reach it and—

"There! That one!"

The shout came in harsh, quick Manchu dialect.

"Halt!"

Illya continued to walk at a steady pace.

He did not turn his head or run or unsling his rifle.

"You! Soldier! Halt, I say!"

Illya walked.

"That one! A spy! Get him!"

Illya began to slowly trot. Then, at a count of *one, two, three,* he dove to his left, rolled, and came up running an erratic zig-zag pattern.

The first shots whined over his head as he had fallen.

The second volley whistled to his right as he zigged left.

He ran faster, then slower and dropped.

The third volley kicked dirt behind him, and whined over his head again.

He heard feet pounding closer behind him. He looked and saw that he had some fifteen yards still to go to reach the first cover of the steel plant.

He rolled onto his back, unslung his rifle, and fired four quick shots at the running guards. They went down, two hit. In the distance behind them Illya saw Dr. Li staring off toward him. Then he saw the four Europeans—they were running to the left to cut him off, and they no longer seemed like simple observers.

Illya fired another burst, then

leaped up and dashed straight and fast for the first cover.

He sprawled behind a rustled steel shape just as the next volley slammed into the steel. He rolled, crawled, and came up running again.

But now he had cover, and he ran fast from cover to cover in the dark night. He could hear the shouted Chinese of the guards at various points behind him. And he heard the softer, more clever footsteps of the four anonymous Europeans off to his right.

He stopped and took stock. The night was dark, the factory silent. They would fan out eventually and cover the area. They would call for reenforcements. But that would take time. Illya smiled to himself.

In the cover of a grotesque rusted steel shape he began to strip. Moments later he stood in the night in complete black. He listened. They were coming closer,

but they were not yet too close. Illya Kuryakin slipped out, all but invisible in the night now, and moved like a wraith into the nearest building.

Inside, he moved across the building until he reached the far side. He leaned against the steel wall and listened. He heard nothing.

Then he heard the step behind him.

"Ah, Mr. Kuryakin, I believe. I rather expected you would double back this way."

The voice spoke in precise English. Illya turned to see the small figure of Dr. Li Po Shue smiling at him with a pistol in his hand. Or whoever this man was in the face of Dr. Li.

FOUR

MAXINE TRENT smiled down at Napoleon Solo. In the grey room the tape recorder still hummed as the tape reels slowly revolved. Maxine Trent gave an abrupt signal by a curt nod of her head.

"Enough for now. We can get all we want later. The information on Kuryakin must be transferred to Peking at once."

"At once," one of the three men said.

The man at the recorder stopped the machine and removed the reel. He handed it to the man who had spoken.

"Take the serum back to the lab," Maxine ordered.

Solo sat silently on the metal chair and watched. He felt in perfect shape, not a single ill effect that he could tell. He looked at the reel of tape and realized that he had told a great deal. In his mind he fixed every impression he could remember of how he had felt to inform the laboratory when he returned—if he ever did.

He watched the two men leave through the section of wall that opened automatically. Maxine saw him watching them.

"You talked wonderfully, Napoleon," the beautiful THRUSH leader said. "My! I never really knew that you knew so much. We'll have some more sessions, of course. I think I'll send you to the main stronghold. The Ultimate Computer will be very useful in getting everything out of you."

"I'll bet," Solo said. "Of course, you know that none of it will be of any use to you."

"Because they know you've talked? Oh no, Napoleon, poor dear. You'll never escape the main stronghold, and you won't be missed for a few days. I know how you operate."

Solo smiled, but his eyes missed nothing as he watched for a chance, and his mind thought about the main stronghold. No U.N.C.L.E. agent had ever even learned where the THRUSH secret main fortress was and lived to tell.

Maxine Trent laughed. "You and your information is going to be my appointment to the council, Napoleon. Think of that. You're going to help me get ahead."

"Very comforting," Solo said.

Maxine grinned and was about to speak again, when a voice suddenly boomed into the room.

"Intruders entering the building! Already inside! Our outer alarm belt inoperative!"

Maxine Trent whirled and stared at a section of wall. The beautiful woman's face was contorted with sudden rage.

"Already in? How? Who is—"

"U.N.C.L.E. agents," the voice boomed. "Waverly is with them, Leader Trent. They have used some instrument to effect entry and render our outer detection inoperable!"

Maxine snarled at Solo. "How? How did they find us? You left no trail! We made sure!"

"We've got our little secrets too, Maxine," Solo said with a grin, but the agent was tensed, ready.

The voice boomed. "There are too many!"

"Disengage," Maxine ordered. "Use emergency plan X!"

The beautiful THRUSH leader turned to Solo. She nodded to the remaining man in the room. "Kill him."

Without another word Maxine walked to the wall and went through. The remaining man drew his pistol and approached Solo. When the man was a few feet away, Solo lunged. The agonizing pain struck his legs and thighs, he fell to the floor.

But he did not fall alone.

He had timed his lunge so that the force of the shock from the chair threw him forward against the legs of the man with the gun. The two men went down in a heap. The gun slithered away across the metal floor.

Solo held on against the pain that surged through his body. His teeth ground and a low moan escaped his lips. But he forced his mind against the pain.

The man crawled and scrambled for his gun.

Solo moaned aloud to make the man think that he, Solo, could not move.

The man reached the pistol and grabbed for it. Napoleon Solo brought his clasped hands down full on the neck of the man.

The man dropped with one choked cry as his neck broke.

Solo sat on the floor, gasping against the pain.

Then, slowly, the pain ebbed and Solo looked around. No one else had come into the room. With Waverly's attack, they had all run, leaving the observation room behind the grey walls un-manned.

Solo picked up the pistol and bent down to touch the metal chair by its legs. He touched carefully, but noticeed that the bottom of each leg seemed to be insulated

with wood. He picked up the metal torture-chair by its leg, and turned to study the grey wall.

He had noted the exact spot Maxine Trent had inadvertently looked at when she spoke to the unseen man in the observation room. He picked up the chair and hurled it against the wall at that spot.

There was a shattering of glass and the wall seemed to fall away, leaving a gaping hole that was actually a room.

Solo vaulted into the room, which was some three feet above the floor of the grey room. Pistol ready, he looked around. The small room, obviously a central communications room, was empty. The various instruments had been smashed. Solo crossed the room to the door and opened it.

He stood in a corridor with the same grey walls and no doors. This was, then, one of THRUSH's sub-stations. Solo listened. He heard doors breaking to his left and he heard faint footfalls to his right. He turned right and ran along the empty corridor.

Soon he heard the sound of water ahead: splashing and the lap-lap-lap of water against a dock. He ran on but more carefully. He rounded a turn in the corridor and saw them.

There were only five of them, and they were waiting anxiously for a small launch that was just coming to the dock. Solo looked for the two who had left with the tape. Maxine Trent saw him.

"It's Napoleon Solo! Get him!"

Solo fell flat to the floor, half covered by the wall of the corridor. He opened fire, the THRUSH pistol in both hands. Two of the THRUSH men went down at his first volley.

Their answering fire sang and buzzed along the metal walls of the corridor.

Solo caught Maxine in his sights. He squeezed the trigger. But an instant before the shot squeezed off, Maxine was gone. Solo blinked. The launch roared into high and heeled far over as it cleared the dock and sped out into the open water of Victoria Harbor.

Solo jumped up and ran to the end of the dock. Far out he saw the launch. Something was being dragged behind it. Solo looked, peered.

Maxine!

The resourceful woman was hanging onto a rope; even as Solo watched, the launch slowed, and Maxine was pulled aboard. Solo grinned. She had seen that he had her dead to rights, and had reacted instantly by dropping into the water and not taking the split second to jump for the launch as he was about to fire!

Solo looked down at the two men he had shot. They were the two who had been in the grey room with him—he had made sure he got them. He found the roll of tape in the pocket of the first one. As he

straightened, he heard the matter-of-fact voice behind him.

"Well, Mr. Solo, I see you didn't need our help."

Solo grinned at Mr. Waverly. "I needed it. I'm afraid I told them a great deal. The sensor alerted you?"

"It did. But we've taken steps to invalidate anything you revealed," Waverly said. "I see you recovered the tape. That will make it simpler. Our only problem is Mr. Kuryakin. I'm not sure we reached him in time."

"You think they got him?" Solo asked.

"I don't know. We reached him," Waverly said, "but Communications reports he did not call in that he had assumed his second cover role."

"He should have," Solo said, frowning.

"I know," Waverly said grimly. "I fear, Mr. Solo, that you will have to immediately resume your trip. But a faster method will be needed now. Riskier, but we dare not wait."

"The sooner the better."

"Good," Waverly said. "I suppose they have stripped this place, naturally. But you must now tell me about the drug they used."

"And a chair. I liked the chair especially," Solo said.

"Everything, Mr. Solo. Now, however, a car is waiting to take you to our special airstrip. Your full instructions will be given in the car. You can dictate your report in the car as you go."

"Yes sir," Solo said.

Two minutes later Napoleon Solo was in the car and speeding toward the airstrip.

FIVE

THE CONVERTED U-2 aircraft droned through the dark night high above China. In the rear cockpit Solo peered below but he could barely see any lights on the ground. With his high-altitude suit and oxygen mask the cockpit was crowded, and Solo gave up trying to see the ground so far below. He checked his weapons.

They were above radar, so high it was a hundred-to-one against the plane being spotted. The rest would be up to Solo. He rehearsed his cover story—a hasty one, but it would have to do.

He was a Soviet agricultural expert on a brief tour of duty in Hopeh Province. At the moment he was on a short vacation in Peking. He had the papers to prove it, and they would pass a cursory examination. Beyond that he would have to count on the fact that all Russians looked alike to the Chinese, and that the present situation in Peking was confused. There had been no time to make a more solid and safe entry.

"Peking in two minutes. You ready, Solo?"

The voice of the pilot came over

the inter-com from the front cockpit of the high-altitude craft.

"I'm ready," Solo said.

"I'll signal as close as possible to the north suburb, but I've got to be sure you're far enough out to miss the city. It wouldn't do to float down right in the Forbidden City."

"No, it wouldn't do at all," Solo said.

"After you eject, you have to free fall down to at least twenty-thousand. The lower you can get, the safer you'll be. If you can hold out until five-thousand you should make it down just about unseen."

"Right," Solo said.

"Good," the pilot said. "Ready now, and good luck."

Solo checked all gear. He grasped the handles of the ejection seat. He concentrated and forced all considerations from his mind except the jump and free fall to come.

"Now!"

Solo pulled the ejection lever. His head snapped back and he felt the force press him against the seat. Then he was falling.

He began to count. He fell through the night attached to the seat and counted as the cold air rushed freezing around him. Then he began to see lights below.

The lights seemed to stand still for a long time.

Suddenly they were close—the many lights of the northern capital off to his left, the sparser lights directly below, and then no lights at all directly below.

The lights seemed to move away to the south, but actually it was only himself falling closer and closer to the ground and the open fields north of the city.

He could almost see trees below.

He pulled his ripcord.

The sudden jerk almost tore his shoulders off.

Then he was swinging in the air.

The ground that had seemed so close as he fell, was now much farther away. He estimated that he had pulled at about 4500 feet. That should make his detection very difficult.

He threw off his oxygen mask and loosened the straps of the ejection seat. He drew his U.N.C.L.E. Special and held the shrouds of the chute in his other hand.

Then the ground came up. Clear, an open field.

He hit, rolled, and was out of the seat. He collapsed the black chute, and crouched, pistol ready for a count of sixty. Nothing happened. The only light he could see was a single light far off to the west. Nothing moved in the field. There was no sound in the night.

Solo got out of the chute. He picked up the chute and the ejection seat and dragged them to a thick grove of trees at the edge of the field. There he stripped off his flight suit, and buried everything in the center of the grove of trees. Then he brushed off his Moscow-made suit, checked his credentials, and began to walk off to the south

and west where the road from the city should not be far.

When he reached the road he turned south. The lights of the city were some ten miles ahead. Solo walked and trotted in a steady pace along the road. He wanted to reach the city as soon as possible, but he could not risk stealing a car and attracting attention. It would also be too dangerous to try to hitchhike, even if a car came past. A Soviet expert should not have to solicit rides.

Then he passed a small cluster of dark buildings and had some luck. A bicycle leaned against a barn wall. He was on the bicycle and away in a matter of seconds. On the bicycle he made much better time and reached the city an hour or so later. He rode the bicycle until the houses and factories of the suburbs showed clearly that he was nearing the heart of the city itself.

He left the bicycle and resumed his walking. He reached the old Legation quarter and boldly entered a hotel known to cater to the Soviet experts, journalists and diplomats in Peking. He registered and his papers were examined. The Chinese clerk bowed to him, if a bit stiffly now that Sino-Soviet relations were not as cordial as they had once been.

He went up to his room, closed and locked the door, after listening for a time to be sure that he was not being watched. Then he

checked the room for microphones. There were none.

Solo sat on the bed and touched his ring radio.

"Bubba this is Sonny. Come in, Sonny."

He spoke low into the tiny sending set. There was no answer. Illya Kuryakin would have his radio on visual and heat alarm only.

"Come in Bubba."

There was no answer.

Solo pressed his ring again and stood up. He took off his left shoe, removed the heel, and brought out a small, flat box. The box contained a miniature dial and a tiny bulb. The bulb showed no response. Solo pressed a minute lever. Then he held the box flat and began to slowly circle his room.

The dial of the tiny box swung

and pointed in a steady southwesterly direction.

It was responding to the sensor implanted in Illya's brain. The sensor, the same that had saved Solo in Hong Kong, had not been activated by a drug, but the small electronic waves it sent out were being picked up by the small box.

The dial showed the direction of Illya Kuryakin.

Solo checked his pistol again, and went out of the room.

In the street he began to walk in the direction shown by the tiny dial. He only hoped that he was in time—the brain sensor would work even if Illya were already dead.

The dial in Solo's hand could be leading him to a grave.

ACT III

WHICH WAY DOES A THRUSH FLY?

THE DANK AND dim stone room was far below the street level of the Chinese capital. Water dripped in show, tortuous drops in a far corner. The stone floor was worn smooth by countless centuries of feet, for this was a room from the far past of the ancient civilization of Imperial China. It had echoed to the screams of uncounted prisoners, and had felt the cold eyes of a legion of inquisitors.

The eyes of the modern inquisitor who sat behind an incongruous grey metal desk in the ancient room were as cold as any in the long history of the silent stones. He was a small, slender man in the uniform of a full colonel of the Army of The People's Republic. His face was clean shaven and pale from years without sun.

The colonel toyed with a small riding whip, brushing it lightly back and forth across the metal surface of his desk. On the desk itself there was nothing but a slim file folder, open, a pistol, and an old-fashioned steel pen in a holder. The only light in the room was on a small table to the left of the desk.

Behind this table sat a short, fat man in civilian clothes. This man looked at nothing but the stenotype machine on the table in front of him. His fat fingers were poised over the keys, but his fingers did not yet move. He was waiting.

The other four people in the room also waited. Dr. Li Po Shue stood silently against the wall some distance from the cold-eyed colonel. General Po Soong Teh sat, as befitted his rank, on a small, upholstered chair behind the colonel. The other two were two of the Europeans who had been associated with Dr. Li since his arrival—two men Illya Kuryakin suspected of being agents of THRUSH.

Illya sat alone in the center of the room, bound hand and foot to a chair, the cold eyes of the colonel fixed on him. The small Russian watched the small riding whip in the hand of the colonel.

It was General Po who first broke the silence.

"I fail to understand what you are waiting for, Colonel Hsuieh," General Po said. "Dr. Li captured the man; his papers clearly indicate he is an American CIA agent. What else is there to learn?"

The small, slender colonel did not look around at the general. It was clear that while the general outranked him, the colonel was neither particularly intimidated or friendly. In this room, rank or no rank, it was the colonel who commanded.

"I am not satisfied, General Po," the colonel said quietly. "Perhaps he is a CIA man, and perhaps not. It is not usual for single CIA men to be operating in Peking in such a disguise. For what purpose, General? The Americans have many better ways to learn of the presence of Soviet missiles here. Such missiles are no secret, really. We have had many such weapons cross China for Viet Nam. Why should the Americans now make such an effort, take such a risk?"

"Who knows how the Americans think?" General Po said.

"I know, General," the colonel snapped. "That is my job."

Dr. Li spoke up. "It is not the missiles, Colonel; it is me they have been watching. I think it logical that they risk a great deal to watch me. I have even expected an attempt to take me back. He probably has accomplices."

The colonel nodded slowly. "That is possible. That makes more sense. Still . . ." The colonel now looked straight at Illya Kuryakin. "Was that your mission, spy?"

Illya's shrewd eyes studied the faces and the room. The pattern had emerged some time ago. Dr. Li and the two Europeans knew who he was and what he was. He sensed that General Po knew also. Only the colonel and his one man did not know.

THRUSH had no desire to let the colonel know who Illya Kuryakin was. It was clear that the colonel was a member of the Chinese secret police, and was a supporter of Mao. Dr. Li and his friends did not want the presence of U.N.C.L.E. known. So they had planted false CIA identification on him, and were attempting to convince the colonel that he was a simple American agent.

The colonel was not convinced and was no fool. There was some kind of power struggle going on. Illya held the balance of power—he could tell who he was, the colonel would believe him, or at least hold the matter open. All he had to do was reveal himself, and Dr. Li and his friends would be in deep trouble.

Except that Illya could not reveal himself. The situation in the room was very clear. There were four men in the camp of Dr. Li, including General Po for some reason, and only two with the official

secret police. Even if, and especially if, he were believed, all that he would do was get himself and the colonel and his man instantly killed.

THRUSH did not want to be revealed here, even by implication. If they could pass Illya off as a CIA spy, well and good, but if they could not, they would have to kill the colonel, the man on the stenotype, and Illya. No, if Illya revealed who he really was, it would be instant death for everyone. His only chance was to play along and see what the colonel would do with a CIA man.

The colonel repeated his question. "Was Dr. Li your mission in Peking, spy?"

Illya Kuryakin shrugged in his best American-bravado style. "That's for me to know and you to find out, chum."

The colonel stared, swore. "The man is not even an American! Am I a fool? This man is English-trained! I detect a trace of native Russian. Who are you, spy?"

"Didn't Dr. Li tell you?" Illya said. "I guess you just never know who anyone is these days."

There was a faint movement in the room. Illya glanced and saw Dr. Li stand away from the wall, his hands in his pockets. The two Europeans were watching Illya. Behind the colonel, General Po shifted forward in his chair.

"The Americans recruit other nationals, Colonel," Dr. Li said. "Who knows that better than myself? They will fight to the last drop of Oriental blood! That is one of the reasons I became sure that the Formosan regime was bankrupt. Few Americans could be spies in China."

The colonel nodded slowly. His cold eyes stared hard at Illya. His hand continued to slowly swing his small whip.

"You are going to die, spy," the colonel said. "If you are an American spy, you will die. If you are not, there might be a difference in your sentence."

Illya Kuryakin shrugged, looked at the colonel. "I am what I am, Colonel."

"So?" the colonel said.

General Po swore. "I suggest you get it over, Colonel. We have better things to do!"

The colonel still did not look at the general. "Do not tell me my work, General Po. A dead spy is of little use to anyone. It is good to know what the spy was doing. Don't you agree?"

"In most cases, of course," General Po snapped. "But in this case it is imperative that Dr. Li go forward with his work, and it is clear what the spy was doing. There was no other reason for this man to be where he was. He has done nothing but follow Dr. Li since his arrival."

The colonel seemed to think. Then he nodded.

"Yes, you are right," and the

colonel touched his whip to a small button.

The outer door opened and three guards came in. The colonel waved his whip at Illya Kuryakin.

"Take him out and shoot him."

The guards swiftly untied Illya and hauled him to his feet. Dr. Li watched, a small smile on his thin face. The colonel did not look at Illya Kuryakin again. The small Russian U.N.C.L.E. agent was hustled out of the room.

In the dank stone corridor outside the interrogation room, the guards pushed Illya before them to the left along the dark passageway. They seemed to go down at a sharp angle for some time. The passageway turned and re-turned on itself, until Illya felt that he was descending into the bowels of the Earth itself.

Then he was stopped, an iron door was opened, and the guards shoved him into a smaller, darker room than the interrogation room. Illya looked around. It was a grim, bare stone room with dark stains of blood all over the floor. In the center was a yawning pit of blackness. Beside the pit was a large steel drum of some chemical.

It was an execution room.

Illya turned to face the three guards.

One of them had a pistol in his hand now.

Then Illya heard a noise behind him. He whirled.

The small, slender colonel stood there. The colonel had come out of a hidden door in the walls. The colonel looked at Illya.

"Very well. Now tell me who you really are!"

TWO

ILLYA KURYAKIN sat on a hard wooden chair that seemed to appear from nowhere. The colonel sat on another chair. The indolent manner was gone, but the small whip was still in the hand of the colonel.

"Let us be clear, whoever you are," the colonel said carefully. "I am not a fool. There was something going on in the interrogation room, something more than there seemed to be. And it is something *you* know, my friend. I have not been a policeman all my life to be fooled so easily."

Illya watched as the colonel took out a long Russian cigarette. The colonel lit it carefully, blew smoke.

"It was clear that Dr. Li, his two companions, and General Po were very nervous and alert," the colonel went on as he smoked. "It was also clear that you knew they were nervous, and I think you know why. The way you spoke it was clear that you were telling me something—something you could not come out and say because you knew that Dr. Li and General Po would not want me to know it."

Illya watched the colonel. It was plain that the man was no fool. In

fact, it was clear that the colonel was very clever, perhaps too clever. If Illya told the truth, what would his fate be then? No, he had to be very careful. He sat and watched the small colonel, who blew intricate smoke rings.

The colonel smiled. "Not that I think that you care very much about my life, but you felt it better to play for time, to risk what I might do rather than what you knew they would do. You are, naturally, aware of the difficulties between men like myself, who back Chairman Mao, and men like General Po, who are of different opinions."

The colonel rubbed his chin. "But I think the problem is more than that. You all but said that perhaps Dr. Li is *not* Dr. Li. The reaction of the good doctor, and the general, to that hint was most noticeable. So, now you will tell me what it is you know, and who you really work for."

Illya Kuryakin watched the thin secret police officer. He did not trust Colonel Hsuieh for an instant. On the other hand, if he maintained that he was only a CIA man, that there was nothing to tell, then he would certainly be killed about one minute after he convinced the colonel.

All he could do now was play for an opportunity—he was, after all, not bound now. The three guards had already been ordered from the room. They would be outside the door and alert, but that could be handled when the time came. Now he had to somehow make the colonel drop his guard for an instant.

"My name is Illya Kuryakin, and I work for an organization called The United Network For Law and Enforcement."

The colonel flicked his whip. "So? An agent of U.N.C.L.E.? Is it possible?"

"You are aware of U.N.C.L.E., Colonel?" Illya said.

The colonel shrugged. "I told you I have been a secret policeman all my life. Yes, I know of U.N.C.L.E. I know much of your work, although I am not at all sure whether I am in sympathy with that work or opposed to it. We are not too amused by international police organizations in China. Still, I have not heard that U.N.C.L.E. concerns itself with the internal affairs of nations."

"Unless those affairs pose a threat to world peace," Illya said. "Or unless an agency such as THRUSH seems to be becoming involved in those internal affairs."

The Colonel frowned. "THRUSH? What is THRUSH?"

"An international organization dedicated to eventually controlling the world, Colonel, and for its own profit. Their aim is power, total power, and all the profit that that would mean."

"And you think they are in China?"

"I have every reason to believe that Dr. Li is a member of THRUSH," Illya said.

The colonel smoked and his cold eyes studied Illya Kuryakin with close speculation. There was doubt, and yet not complete doubt in the eyes of the small officer.

"You're suggesting that Dr. Li is an impostor? I find that most difficult."

"THRUSH is very clever, Colonel. The real Dr. Li is dead, we believe, and the THRUSH impostor has taken his place for a definite purpose—a purpose that I don't imagine is for the benefit of China."

"But Dr. Li is well known! He is in the confidence of Chairman Mao himself," the colonel snapped.

"I said that THRUSH was clever, Colonel," Illya said, "and Dr. Li seems to be in the confidence of General Po, too."

"You are suggesting that this THRUSH has some scheme of its own against China, and that it has convinced General Po, and perhaps even higher men in his faction, to collaborate?"

"Perhaps," Illya said. "It is also possible, in fact most likely, that THRUSH is only using General Po and his faction. THRUSH is always and only for THRUSH."

"You think this THRUSH has somehow convinced the anti-Mao faction in our government that it will aid them to get power away from the chairman?"

Illya nodded. "That's the way I would guess it is working, yes. I think you better keep a close eye on General Po."

There was a silence in the small

and dim execution room. The colonel bit his lip. Illya could see that Colonel Hsuieh was in a quandry. The colonel wanted to believe that General Po and his faction were guilty of subversion, and yet he was afraid to believe that some unknown organization like THRUSH was actively dangerous to China. His police mind was against such a belief. He liked simple facts.

"What, specifically, do you think this THRUSH is doing through Dr. Li, if he is an impostor?" the colonel said slowly.

"I don't know yet," Illya said evenly. "But my guess is that it has something to do with those Soviet missiles."

"The missiles for Viet Nam?"

"I'm not at all sure that they're going to Viet Nam, Colonel," Illya said.

"So?" the colonel said. "You know much. Perhaps too much. How can I believe such a story?! What can Dr. Li do even if he is an impostor? You don't imagine that we will trust him in any sensitive position yet!"

Illya sat quietly. He gave no indication, but it was clear to him now that he was losing the colonel. Not that Hsuieh would forget it all, no, he would investigate, but he would not need Illya. And he would not investigate closely enough, or fast enough, to stop THRUSH.

His bright, quick eyes watched for a sign of weakness. He saw that the colonel had relaxed. Only a fraction, but perhaps enough. Although he had been carefully searched and stripped of weapons, Illya had a few emergency tools still hidden. Now what he had to do was somehow distract the colonel a fraction more.

"I don't think it matters, Colonel Hsuieh," Illya snapped. "I think whatever Dr. Li plans he is already doing! I think THRUSH knew exactly how much Dr. Li could do. I think they are playing with you!"

The colonel jumped up. "You think we are fools?!"

"I think you are in serious danger, Colonel," Illya insisted. "I think you need my help, and you need it fast."

The colonel began to pace the room.

For one instant his back was to Illya Kuryakin.

The small agent moved with the speed of a cat. His right hand swept a button from his black trouser rear pocket. In the same motion he brought the bottom to his teeth and bit.

The colonel had turned, started to pace in the other direction, and had seen the movement of Illya. The colonel reacted instantly, his hand snaking to his pistol in its holster.

Illya threw the bitten button directly in front of the colonel.

The colonel's pistol was out.

A great cloud of white smoke

burst from the button and instantly filled the small room.

Illya Kuryakin flung himself sideways, hit, rolled, and came up on his feet.

But the colonel did not fire.

Totally obscured by the cloud of smoke that enveloped him, the colonel saved his fire and jumped through the smoke. But there was smoke everywhere now, and the colonel stumbled in the blinding cloud.

Illya Kuryakin bent to pull the long scar from his right leg.

The motion could be seen, dimly, through the smoke.

The colonel jumped toward where he saw Illya's faint black shape, his pistol ready—and vanished into the gaping hole in the center of the room.

Screams sounded all the way down, echoed in the smoke-filled room for minutes.

Then there was a horrible thud far below and silence.

Illya wasted no time. The pit was deep and the colonel was gone. The small Russian whirled and jumped to the wall close to the door. The screams would have been heard.

Already the door was being opened.

Illya Kuryakin drew the long, thin, needle of specially strong metal from beneath the false scar on his leg.

The three guards piled into the room in a mob. They stopped,

stumbled through the thick smoke. One shouted orders to his blinded men.

Illya stepped out from behind the door and snaked his arm around the throat of the last guard, thrust with his deadly needle, and the man sagged dead in his arms without a sound.

Illya dropped the body and picked up the machine-gun the man had let fall.

One of the guards stumbled toward him through the smoke. Illya raised up and thrust his needle again. The six inch blade struck the guard just below the rib cage, angled up. The guard screamed once and collapsed.

The third guard fired.

The shots went wild.

Illya squeezed a burst at the flash of the guard's gun. The man was hurled back and fell over the edge of the pit.

Illya stood alone. But the shots would have been heard. Far off he heard voices already. He ran across the room, through the smoke that was now thinning, and looked for the secret door the colonel had come through.

He found it—a large stone that swung easily; some ancient entrance to the room. He opened the door and went through into a narrow passage of stone steps that mounted upward.

He closed the stone behind him, and began to climb with his eyes alert.

THREE

NAPOLEON SOLO stood in the night outside the grim government building. His small sensing instrument showed that Illya Kuryakin was inside the building but below the level of the street. He observed the building closely. It was clearly some military or police headquarters.

Some men who went in and out wore uniforms, but not all of them. The small brass plaque at the door identified the building as Peking Command Headquarters. But Solo had an idea that the building covered more than that. It had a feel of secret police.

Solo took a deep breath, then boldly walked up the steps and into the grim building. Eyes turned to look at him the instant he stepped into the bare, lighted lobby. Among the uniforms, and the Chinese faces, he stood out like a cat in a dog pound.

Two guards converged on him.

"My name is Vassily Kutusov," Solo snapped in Russian, then repeated the phrase in Manchu. "Agricultural expert assigned to the Nanphu collective. My papers. I have an urgent message for your security commander."

The two guards hesitated, looked at the papers which, of course, were in Russian. Solo had caught them off balance with his aggressiveness, as he had hoped he would. He did not let them recover.

"I said the matter is urgent! Where is your commander?" he asked.

The two guards looked for help. An officer came across the lobby. Solo greeted him with a blast.

"Is there someone with authority here?" the agent snapped in Manchu dialect.

The officer took the papers, looked at Napoleon Solo. Then the officer motioned to a man behind a desk in a small office just off the main lobby of the building. The man trotted up, took the papers.

"Vassily Kutusov, Grade-1 Agricultural Advisor, Nanphu Collective," the translator read from Solo's papers. "It seems all in order, Comrade Lieutenant."

The lieutenant nodded, looked at Solo. "You have some information? You will tell me."

"I will not tell you!" Solo snapped. "I will tell your commandant! I suggest speed in this matter. It concerns the spy recently caught, who is probably even now under interrogation by your commandant!"

It was a risky shot, yet not too risky. Solo knew that Illya Kuryakin was somewhere in the building. It was logical that the commandant himself would be concerned with an unknown spy. And Solo was aware of the bureaucratic mind—bureaucrats where impressed by a man who seemed to have "inside" information. They tended to take one fact and make the assumption that a man knew the rest.

The lieutenant was impressed. If this arrogant Russian knew about the spy, then was he not most likely much more than he appeared to be? This was, clearly, out of the province of a simple lieutenant.

"Come," the lieutenant said to Solo, assuming a commanding an conspiratorial manner to impress the soldiers.

Solo grinned to himself and followed the lieutenant along dim corridors and down stairs until they came to a stone passage beneath the street level. The lieutenant ushered him into a large stone room, where the only furniture was a grey-metal desk and some straight chairs. One chair had an upholstered seat.

The lieutenant seemed to look around, a little puzzled.

"The colonel was here. I will find him. You will wait here."

"Not too long," Solo snapped. "I suggest you find your colonel fast."

The lieutenant nodded and left.

Solo looked around the large stone room. It was clearly an interrogation room. But Illya Kuryakin was not here.

Was he too late? They had forgotten to search him for weapons. They did not know just how they should treat a Soviet official. So they hesitated to do anything. Solo checked his U.N.C.L.E. Special, and went to the door to listen.

It was not likely that he could play the same game of intimidation with a colonel.

Far off, muted, and seemingly below him, he heard shots

Solo frowned. Had they shot someone?

There were more shots, and then he heard the pound of running feet —feet that faded as they went not toward the surface but deeper below.

Solo looked around the room to see what cover there was in case he were trapped. He saw little cover. He opened the door and peered out into the corridor. It was a deserted corridor now, the sound of shouts from far below.

The small noise was in the far wall behind Solo.

The agent whirled and jumped for the cover of the metal desk. A section of the wall swung out like a door, and a man all in black stepped through. Solo raised his pistol. The figure carried a submachine gun.

Then Napoleon Solo saw the face of the small man.

"A dead pigeon," Solo said. "You should be more alert, Illya, old buddy."

At the sound of Solo's voice, Illya Kuryakin had dropped to one knee, gun ready. Now the Russian grinned.

"We're even, it seems, Napoleon. Only I suggest we discuss all that somewhere else."

"An excellent suggestion," Solo said. "I think anywhere else would fill the bill."

"My thought exactly. What about that corridor?"

"Clear now, but probably not for long. Was all that noise below your doing?"

"I'm afraid so, and it won't stay below for long. Shall we?"

"After you, my dear Illya," Solo said, grinned.

The Russian U.N.C.L.E. agent moved soundlessly to the door of the room. Solo followed close behind.

At the door they both peered out. The corridor was still deserted, the sound of a minor riot far below.

"I got the colonel," Illya said. "At least, he got himself. They don't have a leader for the moment, and it's made them careless."

"A little luck is vital," Solo said.

"Make that a lot," Illya said. "Let's go."

The two agents moved at a steady trot along the deserted corridor. They angled upward and still encountered no one. Behind them the sound of angry voices had begun to grow louder. Sooner or later someone behind them would think to call ahead and block the exit to the building.

"We can't make it across that lobby," Solo said. "Too many guards and too much space."

"A suggestion?" Illya said.

"There are windows on the ground floor level, probably from smaller offices. They're barred, so

our friends won't think about them —I hope!"

They reached the ground level. Ahead of them they heard shouts. The guards at the main entrance had been alerted at last. Illya pointed to a door to their right. Solo nodded.

The two agents opened the unlocked door, locked it behind them, and turned to look at the empty office. A barred window was directly across the small room. Solo reached it in two strides. He dug into his clothes and came out with two tiny strips of foil. He wrapped a strip around two bars, pulled a small thread on each, and jumped back.

The thermite glowed red and then white. The bars burned through and melted in seconds. The two agents ran to the bars, strained against them, and bent back the sections above and below the melts.

Moments later they dropped to the dark street and ran off into the night of Peking. Behind them, inside the building itself, they heard the confused sounds of a frantic search.

FOUR

THE TWO GIANT double-trailer trucks were parked in the early morning dawn light just off the highway between the roadway and the railroad tracks on the northern edge of Peking. The trucks of supplies and soldiers were parked in a

neat line behind and ahead of the two trailer trucks. The missiles rested on the flat trailers, covered by canvas.

Illya and Solo slipped among the slag heaps and steel shapes of the steel plant. They stopped at the last cover and looked across the open space to the trucks and soldiers gathered in the dawn. Illya nodded toward a small knot of figures near the lead truck.

"Dr. Li and his friends," Kuryakin said.

Solo stared. "And a friend of ours. Look, the third from the left."

Illya looked. The figure third from the left in the group with Dr. Li was a woman. A tall woman. She was dressed now in the uniform of an Albanian officer. But

there was no mistaking who she was.

"Maxine Trent," Illya said. "Your friend gets around, Napoleon."

"At least we know that whatever THRUSH is up to, Maxine will be at the center of it," Solo said.

"The question is, what are they up to?" Illya said. "All we know is that they have killed Dr. Li and substituted an impostor, that Maxine Trent and some of her men are here, and that they are involved with some missiles intended for Viet Nam, but obviously being diverted."

"A lot depends on where the missiles are going," Solo said.

"Which means we've got to go with them."

"I'm afraid it does," Solo said. "But how?"

"Look," Illya whispered softly.

Far down the road a truck was driving slowly toward the convoy of trucks. Almost at the same time whistles blew all along the convoy, and men started to go into feverish activity checking their trucks, securing loads. The group around Dr. Li split up and all started for trucks at the head of the column.

"They've been waiting for a laggard," Solo said.

"Look at the markings on the new truck—they're not the same!" Illya whispered.

"A replacement truck from a different unit!" Solo said. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I'm ahead of you," Illya said.

The two agents slipped through the dawn among the buildings of the steel mill until they reached the road. The new truck was coming along slowly, its drivers clearly not sure if just what they were doing. They got no chance to find out.

Illya rose out of the grey dawn on the right, Solo on the left. The two agents moved swiftly. They signaled the truck to halt at a point where, for an instant, it was out of sight of the other trucks, part of the steel mill in between.

The truck halted, the drivers peering down, obviously unfamiliar with their assignment or the unit they were to work with. Illya jumped up on the running board and got the relief driver. Solo took the man behind the wheel. They stripped the bodies, quickly dressed in the uniforms of the drivers, hid the bodies in the back of the truck, and drove off.

The entire move had taken only a few minutes. As they drove slowly down the road, and around the steel mill toward the column, Illya studied the uniforms they wore and briefed Solo on what unit they were, what rank, what specialities, and what their names were from their papers.

"There are orders directed to a Captain Chang, Transport Command," Illya completed.

"Who looks like he is just ahead!" Solo said.

The column was already on the road. It was moving south along the highway. The captain of transport stood in the road with his hands on his hips. As Illya drove the truck up, the captain shouted: "Orders!"

Illya handed out his orders.

"Fall in line at the rear! What kept you?"

"We got lost!"

"The truck is in good condition?"

"Yes sir!"

"All right. Try to not get lost again!"

The captain trotted away and jumped into a truck as it moved past. Illya and Solo waited and fell in line as the last truck. The convoy wound through the city and out across the plain, heading south and southwest.

At first Solo and Illya were alert each night the long convoy stopped. But they soon learned that their fellow drivers had no interest in them. For the most part the convoy stopped in open fields along the highway, where curious villagers came to stare at them, and the drivers curled up to sleep beneath their vehicles. After a few desultory questions, easily answered by Illya, the other drivers paid them no special attention.

The convoy drove on, day after day, slowly beginning to turn west and then northwest. They passed over the Great Wall outside Lanchow and drove almost straight north. As the trucks passed through Yumen the two U.N.C.L.E. agents knew their destination.

"Sinkiang," Solo said. "The nuclear test center!"

"It looks that way," Illya said.

"What can they hit from Sinkiang?"

Illya Kuryakin thought carefully. "India! Calcutta or Delhi! They are both about fifteen hundred miles, Napoleon."

"That's great!" Solo said.

The two agents drove on, the great mountains of the Tibetan plateau towering to the south, the mountains of Mongolia to the north. Then, suddenly one late evening, the convoy left the road and turned straight north just beyond Hami. A wide, straight, modern highway cut straight ahead through the barren wasteland toward the Mongolian border.

Solo and Illya looked at each other.

"Quite a road for this wasteland," Illya said.

"Exactly what I was thinking," Solo said. "It's a big installation of some kind, and new. This road has hardly been finished."

The convoy wound on for some time as darkness fell across the barren land. Then, ahead, set in a deep bowl surrounded by low mountains, Illya and Solo saw a complex of buildings. Solo studied the buildings as they swung slowly down the mountain road.

"Nuclear all right," Solo said,

"and a new center. Look, two missiles pads!"

"I see them," Illya said. "But, Napoleon, this is a Chinese installation. THRUSH didn't build this. The Chinese are bringing the missiles here. Then—"

"What is THRUSH doing?" Solo finished. "hy are they working under cover, even from the Chinese?"

"Obviously, the Chinese think they are doing one thing, and THRUSH is doing something else," Illya said grimly. "Unless one faction of the Chinese know what THRUSH is up to. Have you noticed, Napoleon, at all our stops, the Chinese officers with Dr. Li are all from the anti-Mao party?"

"I noticed. All General Po's men," Solo said.

The two agents had no more chance to talk. The convoy wound down into the bowl-shaped valley and pulled up in a large area between the two missiles launch pads. In the night all the buildings and the two pads were brightly lighted by floodlights.

"They're not hiding anything," Solo said.

"Which means that whatever THRUSH has in mind is going to come as a big surprise. Somehow, Napoleon, Dr. Li is going to do something, and I don't think it's something to help the Chinese!"

After that all drivers were ordered to take their trucks to unloading depots. Illya and Solo drove to their assigned building. The nuclear base was swarming with workers in dark coveralls, and soldiers who paced a barbed wire perimeter. But there were not many soldiers; the base was remote from any danger.

Their truck empty, Illya and Solo drove back to the motor pool area. In the deserted space, crammed with trucks, the two agents parked their vehicle and stepped out into the night. All the drivers and soldiers of the convoy were laughing and talking toward a lighted barrack building.

"I think we better find out what's going on right now," Illya said grimly.

"I suppose we better. Where do we start?"

"The main control building. I saw Dr. Li go in there with General Po and the rest," Kuryakin said.

"Let's go, then," Solo said simply.

The two men began to glide silently through the night toward the small, but brightly lighted, control center.

FIVE

IN THE MAIN control room of the missile launching site, Dr. Li Po Shue, General Po, three other high-ranking Chinese Officers, Maxine Trent and her three THRUSH aides sat around a table. The conference had been going on

for some hours, as Dr. Li explained his job.

"The missiles will be set up tonight, twenty-four hour work," the thin impostor said. "I will set the controls and the guidance system. General Po will prepare the nuclear warheads for full operational installation in the morning. By noon tomorrow, gentlemen, the world will know that China has operational missiles aimed at India!"

General Po smiled like a wolf. "That should make them take notice of us! Those weaklings in India will be begging us!"

The general looked at Maxine Trent in her Albanian officer disguise. "Our Albanian friends will be glad they backed us. And they will tell our Soviet comrades!"

"We will tell them all, General Po," Maxine said.

"Good! Then we had better go to work."

The conference broke up, and everyone left the room but Dr. Li and one assistant.

The thin doctor worked carefully over the electronic instruments that would control the IRBMs. It was a slow and painstaking job. The doctor and his assistant worked in silence.

The doctor never looked up to a ventilation grid where bright eyes watched him work.

Behind the grid, flat in the ventilation duct, Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo lay in silence. They had been in the small space for some hours now, after entering the building with the help of their hidden devices.

They watched the false Dr. Li Po Shue operate the system controls, then turn his attention to a thick set of blue-prints and specifications. The small impostor and his assistant worked on these for some hours. At last the doctor straightened up.

"That should do it. One missile will be prepared for target Calcutta, and one for target Delhi. That should make the world take us a little more seriously."

"And six years ahead of schedule!" the assistant said.

Dr. Li chuckled. "Thanks to our generous Soviet comrades, eh? Fools! To send IRBMs through China. Your General Po outwitted them nicely when he talked them into sending the missiles to Viet Nam. This should give your anti-Mao faction a big gain."

"And help, in the end, to insure world peace," the assistant said. "With a nuclear delivery punch, they must talk to us. We can make honest overtures for an understanding, and the people will back us once they know that we, too, are strong. Mao's war pose will have to fall."

"Of course," Dr. Li said. "Well, I think we can go and see how General Po is progressing. You go ahead. I have one more minor test to make."

The assistant bowed and left.

Dr. Li stood there for a moment; then he stepped softly to the door. He peered out, was satisfied, and closed and locked the door. Then he returned to the sheaf of blue-prints and specifications he and the assistant had just finished working on. The doctor began to work very fast, making notes, correcting the charts.

In the ventilation duct, Illya and Solo looked at each other as they watched.

Another half an hour passed, and the small scientist stood with a smile. He turned toward the door. There was a light knock on the door. The doctor opened the door. Maxine Trent came into the room.

"Is it done?"

"Done," Dr. Li said.

"Good. Then we must rejoin General Po before he becomes at all suspicious," Maxine said.

Maxine Trent and the false Dr. Li left.

There was a moment of silence in the dark control room.

Then metal grated, and Illya and Solo dropped down to the floor of the room. Solo drew his pistol and stood guard at the door. Illya crossed quickly to the charts and specifications Li had reworked after the assistant had left.

An hour later, as Napoleon Solo still paced nervously at the door, Illya sat back in the chair and stared at the charts before him. He touched the missile load and power specifications. Then he turned. Solo watched him.

"Find it?"

Illya Kuryakin nodded. "I found it, Napoleon."

"Well?" Solo said.

"Dr. Li has changed the rocket attitude, the entire operational data. The missiles, when they are erected on the pad and programmed to these control and guidance specs, will not be aimed for Delhi or Calcutta."

"Where will they be aimed?"

Illya Kuryakin was silent a moment. He looked up at a large world map on the wall of the control center.

"One will be aimed at Peking! The other at a place in the Ural Mountains—the exact spot of the Soviet Missile Testing Station!"

"You mean," Solo said slowly, "if those missiles are fired, nuclear bombs will hit Peking and Russia at the same time?"

"I'm afraid that's exactly what I mean," Illya said. "And I doubt that Russia, or Peking, will stop to ask questions. Each will assume the other fired!"

ACT IV

SONS OF GENGHIS KHAN, ARISE!

ILLYA AND SOLO moved through the dark night of Sinkiang, cold at the high altitude, toward a rocky hill just east of the base below

them now in the bowl-shaped valley. They had escaped from the control building, and the center itself, without trouble, and without being seen.

No one had challenged them, and them had crossed from the valley up into the hills. Now they reached the crest of the hill, and Solo crouched down and pressed the button on his ring radio.

"Napoleon Solo calling Lhasa relay. Agent Solo requests direct relay to Hong Kong Control Central. Over."

There was a silence, and then, "Lhasa relay: stand by, Agent Solo."

Another silence, and the calm voice of Alexander Waverly. "Ah, Mr. Solo, you have been silent a long time. Is Mr. Kuryakin with you?"

"Yes sir, and we don't have much time. They can trace a relay call," Solo said quietly.

"Quite true. You have uncovered the THRUSH plan?"

"Yes sir," Solo said, and explained what Illya Kuryakin had discovered.

Waverly did not speak until the report was finished. Then there was a moment of silence.

Waverly's voice was grim. "I see. The Soviet will blame the Chinese. Mao's faction will probably blame Russia. The anti-Mao faction could blame both the Russians and Mao. Also, Dr. Li will undoubtedly be labelled a tool of

the Americans. No matter what is learned, the situation would be terribly dangerous. It could lead to a very tense situation in the world, a threat of World War III, and chaos inside China at the same time."

"A perfect chance for THRUSH to probably gain control of China!" Solo said.

"At least," Waverly's voice said from far off Hong Kong. "If it did not lead to a world war, with THRUSH hoping to emerge as the ruler of the world, it would probably leave them in control of China. We cannot permit either to

happen, Mr. Solo. We cannot even permit Russia to attack China and create a situation in which THRUSH could take over a weakened China!"

"No sir," Solo said.

Behind him, on the actual crest of the dark Sinkiang hill, Illya Kuryakin watched the barren countryside.

"They must be stopped, Mr. Solo," Waverly said at last. "You and Mr. Kuryakin must stop them. China and Russia must remain as they are. We must gain at least a year of time in which to bring the world to its senses!"

"Yes sir," Solo said. "They'll be stopped."

'Reveal yourselves to General Po if you must. But you must do everything to aid the Chinese in this matter. Every year counts, Mr. Solo."

"Yes sir," Solo said.

The radio went silent. Solo looked at the ring for a moment, then pressed the button to close communications. He stood.

"Napoleon!" Illya whispered.

Solo turned, his pistol in his hand.

Illya Kuryakin pointed down the hill,

Less than a hundred yards down the hill men were climbing.

There were not many, about six, but they came up steadily and carefully. Illya and Solo watched. Then they slipped away to the other side of the hill and started picking their way down through the rocks.

A beam of light caught them like insects on a pin.

Illya dove for a boulder directly in front of him.

Solo flung himself sideways and crashed into a rock, rolled, and lay bruised behind it. A volley of machine-gun fire split the darkness. It came from below on this side of the hill. Then another beam of light stabbed from behind them.

They were caught in a crossfire.

"You take up, I'll take down!" Illya called.

"Right!" Solo answered.

Both agents steadied their weapons and prepared to fight. They heard their enemies creeping closer in the dark. Solo fumbled in his clothes and brought out a long, slender tube. He attached it to his pistol, and inserted a special bullet in the chamber. Then he held it straight up and fired.

Instantly he removed the tube, ejected the special shell, and was ready to fire.

As a glaring light burst in the air over the hill.

A light as bright as day for a long minute.

The men above and below them were caught full in the light of the special flare.

Illya Kuryakin opened fire. Solo fired. Their enemies dove for cover, tried to run, scrambled across the face of the bare hill. Two went down and did not move.

Then the light of the flare faded.

"They'll rush us now," Illya whispered through the dark.

"They will," Solo said.

The two agents lay and waited. They waited a minute, their eyes straining to see in the dark that was deeper now that the flare had faded. They waited at least two minutes.

Almost three minutes passed.

"Try another flare," Illya whispered. "Where are they?"

Solo prepared his pistol and fired another flare. He waited. The light burst high up and illuminated the entire hill.

"Look!" Illya cried.

They were all over the hill in the glare of the flare. Small men on horses, with shaggy hats and bandoliers of bullets, and bright clothes of cloth and leather.

Just as the light began to fade, a small, heavy-set man seemed to appear out of the ground itself and stand on a rock over Illya and Solo.

The man had a long, flowing mustache and carried a small, curved sword. His piercing eyes looked down at them. Then he waved his arms in a wide circle.

All around Illya and Solo men seemed to appear—fifty men, all armed, all watching the two agents.

The man spoke one word. In Chinese.

"Come!"

Up the hill in the last light of the flare the two agents saw that the men who had attacked them first were standing with their hands behind their heads—captured.

One of the men with his hands up was Dr. Li Po Shue.

"Come!" the short, stocky leader of the strange men said once more.

All around the slope of the hill the small, shaggy men on their shaggy horses herded their captives downward and toward the north.

TWO

IN THE STIFLING hut the prisoners sat facing each other. Illya and Solo sat against one wall, their hands tied behind them, and grinned across the dirt floor at the five men led by the false Dr. Li who sat in the exact same condition against the other wall.

"Dr. Li, I presume?" Solo said. "Or *not* Dr. Li, I presume?"

The false Dr. Li shrugged. "What does it matter, Mr. Solo? There has been an error, these nomads will free us as soon as they contact the Chinese authorities. Then you will be dealt with."

"Are you running this show, Dr. Li, or does Maxine Trent outrank you?" Solo said.

Li smiled. "Let us say we are equals. If you are looking for my THRUSH rank, don't bother. You won't have time to care."

Suddenly, in the thick air of the hut, Illya began to chuckle. They all looked at the Russian U.N.C.L.E.

agent, even Solo. The cold eyes of the fake Dr. Li narrowed.

"Something amuses you, Kuryakin?" Li snapped. "I assure you that what these savages will do to you will not amuse you."

Illya looked around the hut, which was built of heavy skins hung over a frame of wicker-like bent boughs. Thick furs hung on all the walls of the hut.

"I'm not so sure that it will amuse you either, Dr. Li, or whoever you are," Illya said. "These savages as you call them are Mongols. From the look of their clothes and horses, I'd say they are from the Chuguchak area, and are Mongol mixed with Kazakh. That leader was wearing a Hetman's shoulder knot."

"Is that supposed to mean something?" Dr. Li snapped.

Illya nodded slowly. "I see that you aren't a real expert on China, or Russia, whoever you are. I think the real Dr. Li would have known what it means, my friend."

"Perhaps you can enlighten me then?" Dr. Li sneered.

"I can," Illya Kuryakin said. "It means that these men are bitter foes of both China *and* Russia! They are known to hate the Russians and the government in Ulan Bator, which favors Russia, and they also hate the Chinese and the government in Peking. They are free nomads who believe they owe allegiance to no one, belong to no one, and admit no borders of any kind. They don't even accept the Mongolian government."

There was a thick silence in the hut. The odor of heavy animal skins was overpowering. But the odor of worry was even stronger. The THRUSH men all looked at each other. Dr. Li rubbed his thin face. There was sweat on his brow now.

"Which means?" Dr. Li said in a tight voice.

Illya Kuryakin shrugged. "That they will not contact the Chinese authorities, or any other authorities, and if they do, it won't be to ask advice. No, I think we are all in the same boat, and the closer they think we are to the Chinese government, the worse it will be for us. The only thing worse, probably, would be to be close to the Soviet government."

Dr. Li was about to make some angry reply, when the skins at the entrance of the hut were thrown violently back and three small, wiry, thin bearded men came in. Each carried an old-fashioned pistol from the vintage of the First World War, but pistols that were well-oiled and well-tended.

Each of the men also carried a long length of leather thong with loops in it. The three men were laughing and talking in some strange language. They laughed, but their eyes were the coldest black Napoleon Solo had ever seen.

Without speaking to the prison-

ers, each of the men looped the thongs over the heads of the prisoners and tightened them around the necks. One of the men fastened his thong around Dr. Li and two other THRUSH men, the other two Mongols took Solo and Illya on one lead, the last two THRUSH men on the other.

Then the prisoners were dragged out by the thongs around their necks.

They were pulled roughly across an open space among huts. The ground had been stamped down by years of many feet. The village itself was in a valley among mountains, set close to a high cliff so that it was almost invisible from the air or any direction. Illya looked around closely, his sharp eyes studying the mountains.

They were all dragged to the edge of the village where hundreds of the Mongol warriers sat their small horses, or stood in surly groups leaning on spears and rifles.

The small, stocky leader sat on a strange throne-like chair covered with furs. The chair was made from the bones of animals, and the decorations were the skulls of men!

The leader stared at them a moment, then motioned.

The prisoners were all pushed to the ground, made to sit before the throne, the thongs still around their necks.

"So," the leader said in Chinese. "Who are you, and why do you fight each other?"

Dr. Li tried to rise, was pulled back by the neck, and sputtered angrily. "I am Dr. Li Po Shue of the Government of The People's Republic of China! I demand that you release me and my men, and execute these enemies of China!"

The leader looked at Li. "So? These men are the enemies of China? How are they your enemies, Chinese man?"

"We have big base, great rockets," Li explained in childish Chinese. "We protect China and you from outside enemies. These men wish to destroy great rockets, destroy People's Republic."

Illya Kuryakin began to laugh. The Mongol leader, and the others, all looked at the U.N.C.L.E. agent. Illya nodded toward the mountains all around.

"Unless I'm wrong, and I'm not, we're not in China, we're across the border in Mongolia. I don't think the leader cares much about China, Dr. Li."

The stocky leader turned his cold eyes toward Illya. "How do you know we are across the border?"

"Because as a young man I have lived near here," Illya said.

"Then you are a Russian!" the leader said.

"Yes," Illya said, "I am a Russian, but I am not working for the Soviets. I am working for an international organization that wishes the peace of the world. This man lies to you. He is here to send the

rockets against Russia and China, to start a big war!"

The leader stared. "You are Russian, but not Russian. This man is Chinese, but not Chinese? You speak of a big war, Russia and China, that is not bad. Russia, China, what do we care? Let them kill each other."

"But the war will come to you, here," Illya said. "There will be many soldiers, much death—here."

The Mongol leader stared at Illya Kuryakin, then looked slowly toward Dr. Li again.

"He lies," Li said. "He is a Russian; he has said so. Are Russians your friends?"

The THRUSH impostor learned fast. The Mongol leader seemed to nod at this charge. He let his black eyes turn from one group to the other.

"We do not care. China or Russia, all the same. We do not care about either, we are ourselves. We are the sons of the great Khan Genghis! We do not want a big war to come to our land. The small man is a Russian, our enemy. The other man is Chinese, our enemy. The big men are strangers to our land, we do not know them. All are nothing, should die, end it."

The Mongol leader studied all the faces of the prisoners. He seemed to be thinking hard. Then he motioned, and five men went to him. These were clearly sub-leaders. The six conferred for a time. In the cold mountain morning, the sun had just reached the top of the valley rim opposite the village. At last, the conference ended.

The leader stood from his macabre seat. "One of you lies. Perhaps both lie. But we do not want a big war to come here. If small Russian tells the truth, then a big war will come here, and that is not good. He says he will stop big war."

The leader turned to Dr. Li. "Chinese man says his rockets will protect us from big war tomorrow. If he tells truth, then it is good for us, too. How do we know which one tells the truth? We do not. So, we will learn who tells the truth. The Gods will tell us who speaks true."

The leader made a sweeping motion. There was a murmur among the horde of Mongol warriors. The five sub-leaders leaped onto their horses and galloped off toward the far end of the village.

Solo watched them. "What does he mean, the Gods will tell, Illya?"

Dr. Li snarled. "Some sort of stupid magic, no doubt! These savages!"

"No," Illya said, his eyes watching the horde of Mongols as they talked excitedly. "Look at them! They're laying bets!"

"Bets?" Dr. Li said, staring. "On what, Kuryakin?"

"On us, Dr. Li," Illya said drily. "You see, it will be a trial by combat!"

THREE

THE MONGOL warriors formed a giant circle far out on the open floor of the mountain valley. One of the sub-leaders rode just inside the circle, four lances in his hand. He struck each lance into the ground as he galloped until the lances formed the four corners of a large rectangle three times the size of a football field.

"Come!" the leader commanded.

The grinning and excited guards pushed Illya Kuryakin and Dr. Li forward toward where the Mongol leader stood with two snorting ponies. There was a great shout from all the wild horsemen of the Mongol Plain as Illya and Li stepped to the leader. They were excited, the Mongols.

Illya and Li stood before the chief.

"You will each take a horse, start at each end of the field. You will have a whip, a knife, and your hands. The man who wins the Gods say tells the truth. The man who loses tells lies. To win you must do one of three results: You must be the man who remains on the field —a man who rides from the field bounded by the lances, or is forced from the field, loses. The man who falls from his horse loses. The man who is killed loses."

Solo, some fifty feet away, listened. He looked around, but there was no way out. The fierce Mongol warriors ringed the field in a solid wall. Solo heard the instructions: a man lost the contest if he was killed, fell from his horse, or left the field of combat for any reason. It was, in short, really a contest of horsemanship! The question was, how good was Illya on a wild Mongol pony? And how good was Dr. Li—the false Dr. Li?

But there was no more time to wonder. With a great shout from the eager Mongols all around the field, Illya and Dr. Li mounted their ponies, with only furs for a saddle, and rode to opposite ends of the field. Solo and the THRUSH men watched tensely. There was a smile on the faces of two of the THRUSH men—perhaps Li was an expert horseman after all!

At the far end of the field, Li stripped off his coat, grasped the whip in his right hand, put the knife in his teeth, and gripped the bridle of the pony in his left hand.

Illya sat his pony, his whip in his left hand, the knife in his belt.

"Now!" the leader cried.

The two men kicked their ponies and rode at each other.

Dr. Li rode straight at Illya, the whip lashing out. Illya evaded the whip, jumped his horse out of the path, and Li hurtled past almost to the edge of the field.

Li reigned expertly, the pony went up on its hind legs, and Li brought it around without the forelegs touching the ground or leaving the field.

Illya swooped into Li before the

impostor could set his pony again. Li's whip lashed out, cutting into Illya's face. But Illya's pony struck Li's pony and the THRUSH man swayed in the saddle. Then the two horses whirled apart. Li galloped up the field, recovered. Illya wiped the blood from his face. The Mongols shouted.

The battle of skill went on in the sun on the arid plain below the mountains. The ponies circled, ran at each other, hurtled around the field. Twice Illya was almost forced off the field by the horsemanship of Li.

Once a cut of Illya's whip nearly unseated Li.

Then Illya caught Li's whip and pulled it away from the THRUSH man. Li had to let go or be pulled from his pony.

Minutes later, in a hand to hand struggle on their horses, Illya lost his whip. Li struck with his knife. Illya evaded, and nearly rode Li off the field.

The contest went on up and down the field in the valley.

Solo watched the Mongol leader. The leader was studying the battle intently.

Then, suddenly, Li had Illya backed to the edge of the field, slipping half off his pony, unable to control the pony. All Li had to do was ride hard and Illya would be beaten. The two horses were side to side. Illya was helpless.

But Li did not push Illya off the field. Instead, the THRUSH agent raised his knife and slashed a killing blow at the helpless U.N.C.L.E. agent.

The blow only grazed Illya, and in that instant his pony slipped out of the trap and Illya regained control and rode off still on the field.

But Illya Kuryakin had lost his knife.

Now the contest took a different turn. Li, his face split in a vicious grin, ceased to try to force Illya off the field, or unseat him. Instead he made attack after attack with his knife.

Li wanted to kill Illya.

Instead of forcing the U.N.C.L.E. agent toward the edges of the field, he inexorably attacked in the center, all his efforts on a kill, his eyes blazing with hatred and triumph as he stalked his unarmed victim.

All around the field the Mongols began to mutter. The contest was going on longer than they would have allowed. With the knife, Li had all the advantage in forcing Illya from the field.

The Mongols muttered, "The horse! The horse!"

Solo realized that what they would have done was kill or cripple the horse of the unarmed Illya and so make him fall and the contest would be over.

But Li continued to attack Illya.

Until, suddenly, Kuryakin broke away and rode fast in a straight line, leaned down below his horse at full speed, and retrieved his knife!

Reigning in, he turned to face the infuriated Li.

Li rode full tilt. The horses collided. Li slashed at Illya. The U.N.C.L.E. agent grasped his opponent, and suddenly both fell to the ground.

The ponies galloped off. The Mongols raised a wild shout. The leader stood and raised his arm. It was a signal that the contest was over.

"Stop!" the leader commanded.

Men rushed out and separated the contestants. Illya stood away, his knife at his side.

Li broke from the Mongols who held him and ran at Illya, his knife raised, aimed at Illya's heart.

"Stop him!" the leader commanded.

The Mongols swarmed over Li and held him.

The Mongol leader approached both men. He looked from one to the other.

"The contest is over. You have both lost!"

"Or won," Illya Kuryakin said quietly.

"No," the leader said, "you have both lost. That is our way. You have the right to say what will be done with each other. Chinese?"

"Kill him!" Dr. Li said, panting.

The leader watched Dr. Li. "You know that if you say kill, he will say kill. You will both die! You know that, Chinese man?"

"Yes. I say you must kill him. He would destroy China!"

Those two famous, fearless and fantastic secret agents give you the kind of action that made you cry

U.N.C.L.E.!

The leader turned to Illya. "And you, Russian?"

"Hold him," Illya said. "Keep him here until I can show you that I speak the truth. I will return to the Chinese base, and tell them what I know he has done, and when they tell you he is a liar, that he will start a big war, then you will know who is right."

"You wish us to return with you? Hear what you say, and what the other Chinese say? You do not wish him killed?"

"His death is not important. What he has done is," Illya said. "He wishes me dead to hide the truth, even if he must die himself."

The leader was silent. The Mongols waited. Then the leader motioned. He pointed to Dr. Li.

"Kill him! Kill all his party!"

Dr. Li paled. "No! You fool, no! Can't you see, you stupid ape, that this man is lieing, I am your friend! I—"

The leader stared at Li. "You are an expert horseman. Why did you not win? Why did you try to kill this man and not just win? Why did you not kill his horse?

You could have won, but you wanted to kill him."

"I—" Li began, and the sudden fear in his eyes showed that he had realized his mistake.

The leader spoke again. Only now, suddenly, the stocky Mongol Chief spoke in English!

"Do you think because I wear skins I am a fool? Do you think I believe in trial by combat and the Gods?' the chief laughed. "I have studied in Moscow and Peking. I have been to London! I speak ten languages. My people are a simple people, but to lead them I knew I must be with the times. To keep our simple life, I had to learn the ways of the modern world.

"You wanted this man dead because you feared he might make me believe him, that something might happen that would make me believe him. So then he is telling the truth. If he were a liar, you would not fear his words, as he does not fear your words!"

The leader laughed, spoke again in English, his people watching him but not understanding what he said. "My people believe the old ways and the old Gods. Good. They do not know that I do not believe. But it is very clear that you, Dr. Li, are the liar. You are willing to die as long as this man and his companion dies too! The only reason you would have for that is that he is telling me the truth, and your plan is ready, and others can carry it on for you!

"You fear what these men tell me. You want them dead at any price. They do not want you dead, they want your plan stopped. Therefore, they are telling the truth!"

There was a silence as the chief stopped speaking. Then the chief motioned again and spoke in his own language.

"This man is the liar. He could have won, but he wanted the words of his opponent stopped. Therefore, it is his opponent who told us the truth. Is that not so?"

The Mongols all nodded.

"Take them and kill them all!" the chief commanded.

Still struggling, Li and the other THRUSH agents were dragged away. The chief turned to Illya and Solo.

"We will go with you. Tell us how to stop the plans of that man!"

"Do you have to kill them?" Illya said.

The chief looked at Illya. "It is our way. Are they not murderers? Would they not die in your country?"

"Yes, they would, but—" Solo said.

"A trial? Yes, but in our law they have had their trial. They have convicted themselves. Now come. We will help you. We, too, do not want a war. We want peace. Peace to live our lives in our own way. Can you stop these men?"

"With your help," Illya said.

"Then we go now," the leader said.

The stocky Mongol turned on his heel and walked away. His subleaders followed him. Already, the Mongol warriors were preparing for battle.

FOUR

ILLYA AND SOLO lay on the rim of the bowl-shaped valley above the Chinese missile site and looked down in the afternoon sun. Illya pointed.

"There, those silver objects—they are the nuclear warheads," Illya Kuryakin said softly to the chief.

"They are not yet on the missiles," the chief said in English. The chief has told them to speak only English. He did not want his people to know how much he knew of the strange modern world they hated.

"One is," Solo said, and pointed.

The two U.N.C.L.E. agents looked at each other. Were they too late? One of the rockets was ready, programmed by Dr. Li to fall on Russia or Peking!

"If we try a straight attack," the Mongol chief said, "will they not fire it before we can stop them?"

"They will," Solo said, and looked at Illya. "Maxine Trent is down there. She'll fire it if we attack."

"Then we can't attack until we can stop her, Napoleon," Illya said. "We'll have to get down there."

"With all those men?" Solo said.

All around the giant missile men worked and soldiers paced on the alert.

"Maxine knows that something's happened to Li," Solo said. "She'll be ready."

"We'll have to risk it, Napoleon. I must get into the control room and sabotage the launch mechanism," Illya said.

The Mongol chief spoke. "We will not attack, but we will appear. We will ride down and threaten the base from the south. They have many men. We will lose the element of surprise, but the risk must be taken. When we ride down and appear, it will divert them, and you can slip in.

"You will do what you have to, and then we will await your signal to attack. When we attack, they will fire their missile. It will fail, and the threat will end."

Illya and Solo glanced at each other.

"Many of your people will die, Chief," Solo said.

"We are not afraid to die. We are only one band; our people are many. A great war will harm all. We do what must be done."

Without another word the stocky Mongol leader turned and walked away toward where his men waited on their fiery ponies below the mountain.

Illya and Solo began to work their way carefully downward among the rocks. When they reached the bottom, they moved to

the edge of the open space on the floor of the valley and waited. Illya pointed to the weak place in the barbed wire fence that they had cut when they escaped earlier, and had pieced back together so that it had not been found.

"When we see the way clear, we go through there," Illya said. "We work around to the left behind the buildings and vehicles. At the control room, I'll get inside; you watch outside. Once I'm in we won't hide any more. I won't need more than a few seconds."

"Right," Solo said. "Will we have time to get out?"

"I hope so, Napoleon."

Solo stared across the open space. "Yes. I hope so."

Then they saw the workers and the soldiers on the base suddenly began to run toward the south. The two agents looked south. The Mongol warriors were defiling from the mountains out onto the valley floor. They brandished their weapons, and formed a great mass on their wild ponies.

On the nuclear base everyone was shouting now. The workers and soldiers grabbed their weapons and ran toward the southern perimeter.

"Now," Illya called out.

The two agents sprinted out across the open space. They were at the fence in seconds, and through the fence. Inside, they ran left and around among the buildings and masses of vehicles readying the missile pads. They reached the control room unseen. Solo crouched, his pistol ready. Illya slipped inside the building.

Napoleon Solo waited in the shadow of the control building.

There was firing to the south—the Chinese were firing. Solo heard nothing from the Mongols. He could imagine the small warriors just sitting their horses, while the Chinese could not figure what was happening.

Inside the control building he heard sudden shots.

Solo waited.

There were no more shots inside the control building.

Two men appeared around the corner of the building. They were Chinese security men. They saw Solo too late. The agent cut them both down with two shots from his pistol.

He waited.

The firing had increased at the south perimeter. But still the Mongols did not return the fire.

Then Solo saw her—Maxine Trent.

Still in her Albanian uniform, the beautiful THRUSH leader came running across the open ground toward the control building. She was not alone. Four other Europeans in civilian clothes were with her—THRUSH men.

Solo readied to fire—and Maxine saw him in the same moment. She opened her mouth, shouted, and dove to the ground.

Solo fired. Two of the THRUSH men were too slow in going down. Now they went down and would not get up. Maxine crawled behind a crate, her pistol out.

Illya Kuryakin came running from the control building. He had blood on his arm.

"Let's get out of here!" Illya Kuryakin shouted, and dashed off to the nearest building.

Solo needed no second invitation. The two agents raced back by the same route in the cover of buildings and trucks. Maxine and her men ran after them. Other sol-

diers appeared now, joined Maxine in pursuit.

Then Solo looked back as they reached the fence. Maxine had stopped. Solo saw her stare toward himself and Illya, and then back at the control room.

Solo had no more time to look. He dove through the fence behind Illya. Barbed wire ripped his arm. Bullets kicked dirt all around them. The air was alive with wasp-like sounds as the pursuers fired at them.

Then they were in the rocks and climbing. Behind them the soldiers and THRUSH men were still following. They reached the crest of the hill.

Illya took out a tiny grenade and threw it. The explosion rocked their pursuers. It was also the signal to the Mongols.

There was a great shout to the south, and instantly the firing increased and rolled across the valley in a massive attack.

The soldiers pursuing Illya and Solo turned and ran back down to their threatened base.

Illya and Solo stopped and looked back down the hill to the base.

They had a clear view.

The battle to the south rose in intensity. The Mongols were taking heavy punishment in their direct assault, but they were pushing into the base through sheer force of numbers.

It would only be minutes before they came within range of the tall missiles on their pads.

"There!" Solo cried.

Far below a man was running between the missile pads and the control room building.

"General Po," Illya Kuryakin cried.

"Is he going to fire the missile?" Solo said, surprised.

"He's going to fire!" Illya said.

"Then he has to be in with THRUSH all the way," Solo said. "The whole anti-Mao group must be!"

The general vanished into the control building.

Illya Kuryakin threw a second tiny grenade. It exploded on the down slope of the hill.

The firing below stopped as if cut with a knife. To the south the Mongols disengaged and rode madly away from the missile base.

"Come on!" Solo cried.

The one ready missile began to steam on its pad, began to shiver and shake as it prepared to launch.

Below all the firing had stopped now. The Mongols were gone.

General Po stood out in front of the control building staring off to where the Mongols had suddenly vanished. Then the general looked at the shivering, steaming missile.

The missile did not rise.

General Po just stood there.

The Chinese soldiers and workers began to run in a wild panic.

Slowly, gracefully, like a tall creature falling asleep, the missile

began to topple over and exploded with a roar on its pad.

The explosion shook the ground like an earthquake. Buildings of the base crashed down, burned.

Solo and Illya lay behind the hill. Illya Kuryakin smiled.

"The warhead won't explode. It wasn't armed. I fixed that," Illya said. "We should be safe."

"Are you sure it won't explode? The atomic warhead?" Solo said.

"Ninety-nine percent," Illya said, and grinned.

The two agents walked down to where the Mongols waited. The nomads had lost many men, but they were smiling.

Solo and Illya mounted small ponies and rode off with the nomad soldiers.

On the other side of the hill there were screams, and flames of fires rose into the sky.

Illya Kuryakin suddenly pointed north. "See that, Napoleon."

A helicopter rose into the air and suddenly swung northwest toward the Soviet border. Solo watched it.

"Maxine," Solo said. "I should have guessed. She saw you come out of the building, Illya. She guessed what was happening."

"And saved herself without telling anyone else," Illya said. "That's THRUSH."

"That's Maxine," Solo said.

And the agent grinned as he watched the helicopter fly steadily to the north.

A WEEK LATER, Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin sat in the comfortable office of Alexander Waverly. The unsmiling Section-I Chief searched in his pockets for a match to light his pipe.

"You did well," Waverly said, found a match, began to light his pipe. "Unfortunately, the Trent woman did escape. Our people in Siberia located the helicopter, but I fear she had long been gone.

"A report tells me that she has been seen drinking with the Albanian Embassy staff in Ulan Bator," and Waverly sighed. "Of course, we did not find her there. But I expect she'll turn up again."

"I expect she will," Illya said, "she just can't stay away from Napoleon."

"You are jealous," Solo said.

"Yes, well," Waverly said, puffed on his pipe. "The THRUSH plot was foiled completely, but I fear the base was inspected by the Chinese, and now there is a great deal of tension between the two factions. It seems Chairman Mao knows that General Po's faction worked with THRUSH. It looks like there will be a purge, possibly civil war. We must see if we can stop it or minimize it."

"You want us to go back?" Illya said.

"Perhaps. I shall have to study the matter. There is going to be a civil battle in China over this, and we may have to help. But meanwhile, gentlemen, take a vacation. Have a rest. Say, you will report back here in two days."

"Thanks, sir," Napoleon Solo said drily.

"Unless I call you sooner," Alexander Waverly said.

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin filed from the room. Waverly puffed on his pipe and stared thoughtfully at the wall. There was a bit of work to be done. And not much time . . .

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THE GOLD-PLATED TALISMAN

He was my enemy, my tormentor. But it was all right. For Death was waiting for him.

by LEO R. ELLIS

ALTHOUGH automotive engineers had spent considerable time and thought designing passenger comfort into the sports coupe, Fenwood Creed ignored their efforts

entirely. He perched on the edge of the bucket seat, a wide space between his rigid back and the moulded backrest.

Fenwood's conservative hat rested squarely on his head, the brim a good two inches above his drawn brows. His pinched expression, with pursed lips, remained a fixed mask of disapproval as he watched the highway unroll ahead of the speeding car.

The other man, a burly, blond fellow who was at least thirty pounds heavier and at least that many years younger, relaxed in the drivers' seat, one hairy paw across the wheel.

Hunk Moller used a minimum of effort to snake a limp cigarette from his shirt pocket and put it between his lips.

"Give me a light, mouse," he said, making the request a demand.

Fenwood winced, but leaned forward obediently and pressed the car lighter into the dash. He waited for the click, removed the lighter and handed it over.

Hunk touched the glowing wire to the tip of his cigarette.

During the lighting operation Fenwood kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead. Hunk looked down at the outstretched hand, and with a sly grin pressed the hot end against the open palm.

Fenwood gave a gasp of pain and jerked his hand away. A rumble of laughter rolled up from Hunk's chest and his shoulders continued to shake as Fenwood searched the floor for the fallen lighter.

He found it beside the leather satchel held between his ankles and replaced it in the dash receptacle.

Hunk continued to chuckle. "You gotta watch what you're grabbing, mouse."

Fenwood made no comment as he resumed his erect position, but he did make an entry in his mental ledger—one more reason to kill Hunk Moller.

The page in the ledger was almost full; it was time to balance the books.

Fenwood had no feeling that killing Hunk Moller could be murder in the sense that he would be taking the life of a human being. Hunk was not a human being, any more than Amby Torney and the rest of his gang were human beings. Killing Hunk Moller was no more murder, than taking the fifty thousand dollars in the satchel could be considered stealing.

If you took money that belonged to no one, it was not stealing. The money in the satchel had been obtained by extortion, gambling and narcotics, therefore it did not legally belong to Amby Torney.

The coupe flashed by the city limits sign of a small town, but Hunk made no effort to ease his foot from the throttle. Fenwood's

expression grew more apprehensive as he glanced at the speedometer and at the sudden wail of a siren behind them, he gasped.

Hunk's only reaction was to swing the coupe to the curb and brake it to a stop. The patrol car stopped ahead of them and a fat, red-faced officer got out. He waddled back toward them, a book in one hand and a pencil half poised. His face wore an official scowl as he approached the coupe.

Hunk had left the motor running. He lighted another cigarette and flipped the match over the policeman's shoulder.

"What's the beef, officer?" he drawled.

The officer's red-tinged scowl darkened. "You were doing sixty-five in a twenty-five mile zone. We enforce our speed laws in this town, mister. Let's see your license."

Moller made the movement toward his hip pocket an indolent gesture. He took out his wallet, flipped it open and pushed it up to the window.

The officer stared at the gold-plated badge pinned inside. His lips moved as he read the inscription, and his face sagged. He looked at Hunk with dull eyes.

"Take it easy going through town, will you, please?" he said. "We got kids here—school's out now and—" His voice trailed off as he turned away.

Moller shoved the wallet back into his hip pocket. "That's how it works, mouse." He burned rubber as he spun away from the curb and by the patrol car, where the fat officer stood, putting the book away.

Fenwood knew how it worked. He knew about the badges—bought with bribes—that the really big shots of Amby Torney's gang all carried. They were shields that made the bearer immune. The badge was a magic amulet that opened doors, provided protection and made even the lowest of men supreme.

Fenwood Creed had known nothing of these things until two years before, when he came to work for Amby Torney as a bookkeeper. In his former job as junior clerk in a large insurance company, he had accepted the fact that he was a nobody. He admired the executive officials, but he did not covet their position. He had no aspirations to attain the unattainable. He was resigned to his lowly station in life.

Only after he had come to work for Amby Torney were Fenwood's eyes opened. As he handled the huge sums of easy money that flowed in, and saw stupid oafs like Hunk Moller rise in power, Fenwood's resentment grew to hate his position in life.

He began to dream of a greater Fenwood Creed, and always at the nucleus of the dream was the gold-plated badge.

Fenwood was not a man to move fast, so it had taken over a year before he had summoned up enough courage to approach Amby Torney for a badge.

His timing had been unfortunate, for while the gang boss had merely shrugged the idea away with a snort, Moller had walked in and heard the request.

The next morning when Fenwood entered his office, he found a large, cardboard star lying on his desk. The star was covered with gold foil, with a safety pin fastened to the back, and across the front was lettered "Deputy Mouse".

As he stared at the thing, a group of men rushed in, grabbed him and pinned the star to his coat. Fenwood had fled, swept through the door on a wave of jeering laughter.

Fenwood stayed on with his job, for the wages were far better than he could command anywhere else. At that point though, a plan had begun to form in his mind—a plan that was to bring about the emancipation of Fenwood Creed.

Hunk Moller stretched out in the driver's seat without lifting his foot from the gas pedal. He yawned loudly.

"We'll be back in the city in a couple of hours," he said. "I'll bet you've got some big plans for tonight, eh, mouse?"

Fenwood's reply was made in a flat, clipped tone as he held his eyes on the road. "No, I have nothing special in mind."

"We collected a pile of loot on this trip. You know, a guy could really live it up on that much cash."

Instinctively, Fenwood touched the leather satchel between his ankles. "I suppose he could—that is, of course, if the money really belonged to him."

"Money belongs to whoever holds it." Hunk yawned again. "Just holding that much cash could give a guy ideas." He glanced over at Fenwick. "I'll bet that's why Amby sends me along on these collection trips. He's afraid you'll get tempted and try to run out on him."

Fenwood's body straightened a fraction of an inch. His hands clenched in his lap, so the knuckles turned white where his fingers interlaced. His lips moved, but the first sound he uttered was a gasp of indignation. "That's not funny. You know Mr. Torney sends you along to be a bodyguard."

Hunk Moller threw back his head and let out a bellow of laughter.

"Mouse, you're a gasser," he said. His laughter stopped as he suddenly tired of the game and he slouched down, with his fingertips drumming the rim of the steering wheel.

It had taken almost a year for Fenwood to perfect the plan, and to gain enough courage to carry it

through. He had formed each step with the same precise care he used in making an entry in his ledgers. He had left nothing to chance; he had overlooked no detail.

Now he inched his right toe up the floorboard, to a point near the firewall, while he watched Moller from the corner of his eye. The big man continued to stare ahead through half-closed lids.

Fenwood found the button on the floorboard, but he did not press down; it was not yet time for that. He had paid a mechanic to install the mechanism a week before. Pressing down the button would short out the ignition.

Obtaining the automatic pistol that now lay on top of the money in the satchel had been simple. He had merely taken it from the arsenal that Amby Torney kept in the closet off his private office.

The final step—Fenwood's disappearance—had taken a great deal of thought and consideration. Torney was not going to take the loss of fifty thousand dollars lightly. He would make every effort to find the thief, and once he found him, Torney would extract full revenge.

The gang boss had connections both here and in foreign countries, so Fenwood knew he would have to disappear completely. He had gone far out of Torney's territory to find a printer who could provide a set of false identification papers and a passport. Fenwood had booked passage on a foreign freighter under his assumed name, and had rented a room where he could hide out until the vessel sailed.

He intended to go to South America, where fifty thousand American dollars would last a prudent man a lifetime.

Fenwood leaned forward slightly. The territory here was familar to him, for he had driven this stretch of road several times during the past few weeks. He knew every house, every fence and every tree. As each landmark flashed by, he checked it off on his mental countdown. He knew exactly how far it would take a car to coast to a stop from any given speed.

A culvert appeared ahead. Fenwood estimated the distance, and then with the precise motion he used to push down an adding machine key, he pressed the bottom with his toe.

The motor stopped, leaving a sound vacuum in the car. The wind whistled against the windwings outside as Hunk sat up, a stupid look of surprise on his face.

Fenwood kept his toe down as he looked over. "Is something wrong?"

Hunk Moller muttered a curse and pumped the gas pedal. He leaned forward and flipped the key back and forth several times as the coupe continued to lose

speed. Still cursing, he guided the car onto the dirt shoulder of the road and stopped only a few feet short of the culvert. Moller yanked the door open and got out.

Fenwood waited until the other man had raised the hood, blocking out the view from the front before he unsnapped the catch on the satchel. He took out the automatic and held it for a moment. The gun looked heavy and unnatural in the thin, veined hand. He pushed the automatic into his coat pocket before he refastened the satchel and stepped out.

Hunk Moller was leaning over the front of the car, his head in the motor compartment. Fenwood came up behind him, but the other man continued to wiggle the wires in an effort to find a loose connection.

Fenwood took the gun from his pocket. He had a speech prepared, but he did not speak. His hand trembled as if the automatic were too heavy to lift. He finally held it shoulder high, directly behind the other man.

"Hunk."

Moller raised up. With the muzzle only inches from the short, blond hairs on his neck, Fenwood fired. The explosion and recoil stunned him; he had never fired a gun in his life. He recovered and grabbed the back of Hunk's jacket, tugging to one side with all his strength. The body fell so it bled on the dirt of the shoulder.

Fenwood wanted no bloodstains on the pavement, where they would be hard to remove.

He stared down at the limp hulk lying on the ground while he checked his next move. Each step was indexed in his mind, in neat, chronological order, each to be performed in the proper sequence.

He was to remove anything of value from the body; the ring, the wristwatch and the wallet he dropped into his pocket. He then tackled the job of dragging the body off the road and down the sharp incline.

When Fenwood had first chosen this as an execution spot, he had considered stuffing the body into the concrete pipe. He had abandoned that as being unfeasible. Now that he had the remains of Hunk Moller down in the ditch, he nodded with satisfaction. It pleased him to know that his earlier decision had been correct.

But even the alternative plan of dragging it a short way up the side of the ditch, and covering it with the heavy weed growth, proved almost too much for him. He staggered back up to the car and leaned against the fender, panting and exhausted.

He had recovered and was brushing off his clothes when he heard a car approaching. With a start, he realized the driver was slowing down, so he quickly closed the hood and gave a wave of assurance.

He waited until the car had completely disappeared before he stepped a few feet down the embankment and kicked a hole in the soft earth. He dropped in the wrist watch and the ring. He transferred the bills from Hunk's wallet into his own and then unpinned the badge. Dropping the wallet after the other articles, he kicked dirt in the hole and returned to the car.

He stopped at the car door for a moment and looked down. As he gazed at the gold-plated badge in his hand a strange thing happened. Some invisible power, or force, seemed to flow from the metal, up Fenwood's arm and into his body. His chest swelled to strain the buttons. A new glint appeared in his eyes and his jaw thrust out at a determined and aggressive angle.

Fenwood pinned the badge into his own wallet, snapped it shut and pushed it into his hip pocket. An unfamiliar smile touched his lips as he looked down into the ditch and gave a curt gesture of farewell.

"So long, deputy mouse," he said. "Let's see how you make out without your badge."

He placed the automatic in the glove compartment and locked the satchel in the trunk. Gone was the hesitant uncertainty that had marked his movements before. Now he acted with self assurance, but without haste, for he didn't plan to arrive back in the city until later that evening.

There had never been any set schedule for the collection trips, so Amby Torney didn't expect them at any specified time. The lieutenants who managed Torney's operations in the smaller towns were often hard to locate. Their accounts were seldom complete, and Fenwood, being methodical and thorough, insisted they specify every item before he would complete his report.

Tomorrow Torney would become concerned. At first he would fear hijackers, then perhaps he would suspect Hunk Moller of doing away with his bookkeeper and taking the money. If the truth ever did percolate through the gang boss' brain, Fenwood Creed should be far away by that time, and safe in his new identity.

He drove at his customary, law-abiding pace, although instead of gripping the wheel with both hands, he sat relaxed, with his left arm resting on the window ledge.

The printer had agreed to have the fake driver's license, the birth

certificate and the passport ready at ten. Fenwood Creed pulled in at a roadside restaurant and had a leisurely cocktail before his dinner.

When Fenwood entered the city, he drove the side streets to reach a section far from his usual haunts. The buildings became more and more shabby, until he entered a street where the ordinary tenement house would be considered a luxury dwelling. He had been here once before, when he had contacted the man about the bogus papers, and the disgust he had felt then, returned.

His nostrils pinched together in an effort to shut out the stench of neglected garbage, dank walls and rotting timbers. He refused to look at the humans, clustered in huddled coveys on street corners, or standing alone in darkened doorways.

He pulled the coupe up to the curb and parked two doors from his destination. After removing the automatic from the glove compartment and placing it in his coat pocket, Fenwood sat for a moment, considering what he should do about the satchel. He remembered the face of the man he had to do business with, and decided to leave the satchel locked in the trunk.

A short flight of steps led down to a door, with the single word *Printing* lettered across the grimy glass. Fenwood pushed the door open, and a bell tinkled as he entered a cluttered cubicle.

At once a scrawny man came through the other door. Without speaking, he crossed to the desk, opened a drawer and took out the papers. He spread them across the desk top.

Fenwood hurriedly examined the documents. They all looked genuine, with the name, David Gorman, entered on each one. The age was the same as Fenwood's, also the physical description. Fenwood wet his lips.

"I've already paid you half. Here is the rest," he said, and these were the only words spoken in the shop.

As the man riffled through the bills, Fenwood backed toward the door, stuffing the papers into his inside coat pocket. He turned and ran back up the steps, pausing only long enough at the top to tear up his own identification papers and drop them into a trash receptacle.

The black coupe stood where he had left it. But in the short time he had been gone, someone had forced the lock on the trunk. The lid stood open. Fenwood yelled and broke into a run as a small figure dashed out from behind the car and fled down the sidewalk, the satchel swinging in his hand.

Fenwood gave chase. "Thief! thief!" he shouted as he ran around, or pushed aside pedes-

trians that had suddenly clogged the sidewalk.

A streetlight revealed the figure to be a small boy, dressed in levis, sneakers and a white tee shirt. Fenwood ran on, and as he rounded a corner, he saw the boy pause, and then dart into the mouth of an alley.

Fenwood stopped at the opening, gasping for breath. A flashing neon sign across the street intermittently bathed the alleyway in a rosy glow, showing the end blocked off by a brick wall. On both sides there were windowless buildings. Debris littered the paving, and against one wall there was a trash filled cardboard carton. Fenwood pulled out the automatic and walked cautiously into the alley.

"Come out from behind there!" he ordered, pointing the gun at the carton.

The boy rose up, and advanced toward Fenwood slowly, as though seeking a way to dash by and out to the street again.

"Give me that satchel."

The boy stopped, the satchel still clutched in his left hand. He crouched. There was a click, and a sliver of steel appeared in his right hand as he leaped forward.

Fenwood pulled the trigger, and the resulting blast in the narrow canyon shook the bricks. This time Fenwood did not flinch, he rushed forward and tore the satchel from the boy's hand. For the second time that day he looked down on a fallen body.

Even before he turned, he heard the rumble of voices, a hollow reverberation like the dashing of angry waves against a rocky shore. He whirled to face a crowd who had closed the alley mouth. People who had followed the chase, men and women who had appeared at the sound of the shot.

Fenwood took a backward step over the boy's body. He half raised the gun and pointed it at the humanity that stood between him and the street.

"The boy broke into my car," he said in a quavering voice. "He pulled a knife on me."

The crowd was multiplying by the second. Those in front were being pushed forward by the new arrivals in the rear.

Fenwood took another backward step, then he remembered the badge and stopped. He pulled out the wallet that contained the magic talisman, the symbol of authority that had protected Amby Torney, Hunk Moller and the others.

He flipped the wallet open and held it high over his head, so the red light from the neon sign flickered and flashed against the polished surface.

The crowd's reaction to the badge stunned Fenwood. It exploded with a roar of denunciation that deafened him. Screaming insults, the horde poured forward.

Fenwood quickly brought his arm down and tried to hide the badge under his coat.

"I'm not a policeman," he shouted, but his voice was lost in the sound of the mob. He opened his mouth to shout again. A brick struck him in the chest, tearing the breath from his lungs and he almost fell.

He tried to hurl the badge away. A beer bottle crashed against the side of his skull and he went to his knees. He pitched forward, his hand involuntarily clutching the wallet as a wave of humanity stomped over him in maniacal fury.

Fenwood Creed never achieved his emancipation, but he did lose his identity. The morning paper carried an item: *The body of a man, identified as David Gorman, was found in an alley early this morning. Police say Gorman had been beaten to death.*

ATTENTION—ALL DETECTIVE FANS

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THE TORMENTED

by JAMES McKIMMEY

He was safe now. No one would ever know, for dead men tell no tales. Yet, in the night, he remembered what the slain man had written: This money is tainted. Only Death comes with it . . .

A CHILLING EVENING wind blew across the small crossroads town on the spine of the Coast Range Mountains. Inside the Copper Lantern Bar and Restaurant the air was fragrant and warm from logs blazing in the huge stone fireplace. The aroma of charcoal-broiled steaks and garlic bread came from the restaurant section, whose broad windows overlooked the vast spread of the San Francisco Peninsula below.

David Farrel sat at the L-shaped bar and ordered another beer. It was a Thursday and customers were sparse. Only two parties were dining. Farrel and three other locals sat at the bar; one was Vince Ecker, a regular.

"Eggskull!" Ecker boomed to Farrel from down the bar. Loudly, Farrel thought. Always loudly.

He turned his head to look at the large, sinewy man whose eyes were the color of gun metal—which was appropriate, Farrel thought. "I'm thinking, Ecker."

Ecker wheezed—there was no other description for his laughter. "That's what you do, all right, Eggskull. Think. But it don't make you any money."

The man wore a black nylon jacket, tan Levis and hunting boots. A white Stetson was pushed back from his pulpy, cruel face. His ski-styled sun glasses rested on the dark wood beside his beer bottle. He grasped the bottle with a broad, stub-fingered hand and drank.

He was a primitive, Farrel thought bitterly, born into an advanced civilization that had done little to bring him up beyond his animal status. Yet he had been able to secure himself a good living as a construction foreman. He also owned a shrewd child-like ability to make the savage cut, as he had just done again.

He knew that Farrel had received a lengthy college education, but Ecker also knew that Farrel was presently living near pauperhood, trying to support a wife and child on the meager pay he received as a book clerk in Palo Alto, ten miles below. But that particular situation was going to be corrected, Farrel thought.

"Is that the extent of your contribution?" he asked acidly. He was as large as Ecker, but there was a difference in their physiques. Beneath Farrel's bulk was fat, not muscle. His face was pale, against the weathered brownness of Ecker's. He would have liked to have suddenly transformed himself into a tough and muscular specimen in order to take care of Ecker physically. But there were more realistic ways.

"I was wondering if you want to go night-cooning again," Ecker said.

Farrel turned away as Ecker began wheezing again. He remembered vividly that night two weeks ago when he'd gone hunting with Ecker. Out of some foolish belief that he should test his courage in Ecker's presence, he'd agreed to it despite the fact that, unlike Ecker, he had never wanted to see any animal killed.

He'd got into the man's pickup truck with four lean hounds inside the special compartment built on the flatbed behind. They'd driven on to a narrow road at the rear of the large rental ranch owned by Martin Brindmart, a retired investor who lived in seclusion in his sizeable house built on that land.

He'd got out of the cab as the carbine-carrying Ecker had walked behind the truck to open the dog's compartment. The hounds sprang out in smooth, stretching leaps and immediately began ranging, noses to the ground and yipping.

Eckert switched on his powerful flashlight as the dogs found a scent and gathered to bound into the darkness.

Farrel was a lover of nature. He

particularly liked animals. He loved to hike through the hills to observe deer grazing on the highest slopes. He liked to see rabbits springing away from his step. He liked cats and dogs—even the hounds owned by Eckert, who had been bred and trained to lead the butcher to his quarry. All animals, he thought, could be categorized into just what they were.

The devious breed was human. He cared little for anyone of those, including his son Jolly, and certainly his wife Milly, who refused to allow him to own a pet of any kind.

Yet here he was, walking across a field with a killer of deer, raccoons, anything on which he could sight his gun. Because he was growing increasingly more nervous, he tried to make conversation: "Doesn't Brindmart mind our being out here at night?"

"Minds any time, Eggskull. To hell with him. I've took more deer meat off this land of his than you could figure. What's he going to do about it?"

"He's peculiar, isn't he?"

"Hermit, that's what he is. Even his own foreman don't get beyond his fence. Only me, when I deliver his supplies every Saturday."

"How come you, Ecker?"

"I trained his dogs. You ever see them?"

"I hiked in one day to where Rawls' house is by the gate. I saw them."

He pictures those two dogs running back and forth behind the steel barbed-wire topped fence that Martin Brindmart had ordered built around his house: German shepherds, trained to attack on command. Trained, he now learned, by Vince Ecker.

"Them dogs would listen to two people only. Brindmart and me. No more, though. They're dead and buried."

"What happened?"

"Someone threw them a hunk of poisoned meat. Now I got to train me two more for him."

Farrel stepped gingerly over the tufted grass. "I hear Brindmart's rich."

"Yeah," Ecker said shortly.

"Why does he hide away like that?"

"Who knows? He's a nut."

But Farrel was not so sure about that. Having seen Brindmart's sanctuary, he'd become increasingly envious of the man. Brindmart's life, he'd decided, was one of perfection. Free of all worries and all responsibilities, he could live exactly as he chose.

As Farrel moved apprehensively through the night, with the dogs running ahead of them, he was regretting everything. Because of a small inheritance, he'd been able to remain in college for graduate study in English literature. He'd been content there. But then he'd met Milly and made the unfortunate mistake of marrying her on a slightly drunken weekend in Reno.

Now they had Jolly, a bit under two years old. Farrel, who'd failed at a brief stint of teaching, had been required to become a clerk in a book store to support them. He would gladly, he thought, trade places with Martin Brindmart.

The sound of the dogs turned into a wild chorus of barks and yelps.

Ecker hurried his pace. "They got one."

Farrel followed him reluctantly over the rise of a hill, then down where the dogs were gathered around the trunk of an oak. Ecker pointed his flashlight upward to find the treed raccoon. The animal's eyes glowed against the light. Ecker handed Farrel the flash.

Listening to the bedlam of the dogs, feeling his throat dry, Farrel held the beam on the raccoon as Ecker carefully lifted his carbine. There was the crack of the rifle, and Farrel closed his eyes. As Ecker reclaimed the flashlight, Farrel looked again and saw that the raccoon had dropped to the ground, where it was slashing, biting and growling viciously, as the dogs darted at it.

"You didn't kill him," he managed.

"Hell, no!" Ecker said happily. "The dogs do that. I just winged him."

Farrel watched in horror as a small hound's belly was slashed by the raccoon's claws. "You're letting your own dogs get killed!"

"I get some more!" Ecker said in delight.

Farrel looked again at the bloody, raging battle. Then he trotted away. He stumbled over another small rise and sat down weakly beside the trunk of a small, wind-warped tree. He thought he would be sick for a time, listening to that wild sound of battle behind him. Then he managed to control himself.

He finally realized that he was sitting in a small cleft of a hill which rose directly above Martin Brindmart's house, no more than five hundred yards below. Outside the fencing, there were the lights of the smaller house used by the foreman, Cass Rawl. Then the long run of dark space to the larger house where light shown from a wide window.

Farrel used his excellent eyes to see that Brindmart was reading a book in a leather chair beside a desk and fireplace. He was lean, white-haired, and wore dark-rimmed glasses. He put the book down and walked to a wall.

He reached under a corner of the desk, and a panel of the knotty pine wall slid back. He reached inside the recess and drew out what was obviously a packet of currency. He put his hand beneath the corner of the desk again; the panel closed. He placed the packet in a drawer of the desk, then returned to his chair and began reading again.

Farrel rubbed his mouth. Finally he returned to the truck, where he waited in the cab until he was startled to find Ecker's flash suddenly lighting the hood. A ripped carcass of a raccoon was slapped down on the metal. Ecker wheezed with laughter. "What's the matter, Eggskull? You don't like a little fun?"

FARREL POURED beer from his new bottle and listened to Ecker wheezing again.

"He just don't like that night-cooning no *way!*"

The bartender diplomatically refused comment. Instead he said, "How's that new Winchester working out, Vince?"

"Best you can buy," Ecker said with enthusiasm. "I got that thing zeroed in so I could shoot the eye out of a gnat at a thousand yards."

Farrel sat holding his glass, staring straight ahead, reviewing everything he'd learned since he'd seen Martin Brindmart remove that currency from the recess hidden behind the paneling. By discreet questioning, he'd found out that Brindmart never left the privacy of his fenced acreage. One of the single personal contacts he made was with Cass Rawl, his foreman. Most of that was accomplished by phone. Fees for renting his ranch land were collected in cash by Rawls, who then turned them over to Brindmart. Farrel was reasonably certain that the man used no bank.

The only other person who dealt with Brindmart was Ecker, who was paid to bring in Brindmart's supplies every Saturday morning, a habit begun when Brindmart had added the attack dogs to his protection; no one but Ecker could have gone past them.

But Brindmart was now temporarily without dogs, and that, Farrel thought, was going to make the difference. Give credit to Ecker for it.

Farrel had heard the general community opinion that it had been Ecker himself who'd poisoned the animals—they would have accepted meat from no one but Ecker or Brindmart—in order to sell Brindmart two new ones. Eckert was disliked by most everyone who knew him. And that too, Farrel told himself, was going to count.

The door opened; the cutting wind blew through the interior. The logs in the great fireplace snapped as blue-yellow flames wavered. Cass Rawl stepped in, wearing a cowhide jacket with

butter-colored Sherpa pile, a full black Stetson, overall pants and worn cowboy boots.

He was a thin man in his early thirties; but his face was already deeply lined from exposure to weather. He nodded briefly to Farrel, who had talked to him casually last week, when Rawl had stated his dislike for Ecker in his North Texas drawl: "A damned sadistic butcher. If Mr. Brindmart hadn't got hooked up with him on account of the dogs, I'd never let him set foot on the ranch. The way it is, he delivers supplies every Saturday, nine in the morning. I press the switch and open the gate and wave him through. That's all I'll have to do with him. I ever catch him hunting on Mr. Brindmart's property, I'll see he's prosecuted."

Rawl walked to Ecker, who smiled and looked at his beer bottle. Rawl handed him a folded sheet of paper. "List of stuff he wants Saturday."

"Okay."

"Somebody was coon-hunting two weeks ago. Heard it, at night. If I catch a man doing that on Mr. Brindmart's property, I go for him personally."

"You told me that already. Think it was me?"

"I know it was."

"Maybe it was Farrel over there. Give him the lecture."

"Somebody's been night-hunting deer, too. Freezing them with a flashlight and shooting them that way. Next time he does it, he'll get the book thrown at him."

"Wonder who it was?" Ecker said, still smiling.

"Somebody using a Winchester Seventy."

"How do you know?"

"Know the sound."

Ecker shrugged. "Doubt it. But even if you do, lots of people use a Winchester Seventy."

"Deliver the supplies, Ecker," Rawl said tightly. "Train the dogs. Otherwise, stay off the land and away from Mr. Brindmart." He wheeled and left.

Ecker delivered his laugh and pushed his empty beer bottle away. "I got to get home and feed them dogs. Seven I got now, counting the new shepherds."

Farrel tapped the bar and placed a bill on the wood. "Buy him a beer."

Ecker looked at him in surprise. "What's got into you?"

"I'm trying to make friends. Complaining?"

"Hell, no," he said contemptuously. "Let's have the beer."

FARREL OBSERVED the few cars parked in the near darkness outside. There were no street lamps; the only lighting came from an orange neon sign on top of the building and another in the window of the general store down the street. Ecker's pickup was parked beside Farrel's old Plymouth sedan.

He stepped between the two

vehicles and looked into the interior of the pickup. The keys were in the ignition. Ecker's Winchester, with its mounted scope, was held by specially installed clamps along the front edge of the seat just above the flooring. The habits of a man, Farrel thought, were in direct ratio to his personality. Ecker was an egotistical bully, he believed that no one would dare take something he owned. As a result he carelessly left his car in this condition.

Looking toward the bar, hoping the extra beer would hold Ecker in there, Farrel opened the left-hand door. He leaned inside and carefully removed the rifle from the clamps.

He moved quickly to the rear of his own car, lifted the door of the trunk and placed Ecker's rifle there. Then he picked up a second rifle—same model with an identical scope—and closed the trunk. He stepped back to the pickup, pushed the second Winchester into the clamps, then softly closed the truck's door.

As he got into his Plymouth, he realized that he was breathing quickly. He drove away, regretting only the money he'd paid for that rifle at a large and busy sporting goods store in San Francisco where, he was certain, he would never be remembered. It had taken most of what meager savings he'd had in the bank. But it was an investment that would pay returns—if it worked.

He stopped his car beside the small cabin he'd rented to house his family, then walked through the wet wind into a steamy kitchen which smelled familiarly of ham and lima beans. Milly looked at him reproachfully.

Her hair was in curlers—her permanent do, he thought dismally. The lines of her plump face—she was fifteen pounds heavier now than when he'd married her—were set in that vacant expression worn ever since Jolly had been delivered. Her voice came forth in a thin, high whine: "I have to hold dinner every night!"

"So you do," he said wearily, and looked into the living room, where Jolly was trying to work his portable crib into a wall by yanking back and forth on a top slat.

"Night after night!" Milly shrilled.

He walked into the living room and sat down in an ancient easy chair. Jolly saw him and started babbling loudly, shifting the direction of his manipulation. Moments later the crib jarred into one of Farrel's shins. Grunting with pain, he stared back in fury at the wet, wicked smile Jolly was showing him.

Vince Ecker's redwood house, its shingles catching the last light of the following day, was in a secluded hollow at the north edge of the sparsely housed community. Farrel stood in the protection of a thick grove of trees above, watching the

man working one of the shepherds in the fenced area of his dog run. He wore the protective gear of an attack-dog trainer and held a small leather whip with frayed ends, which he repeatedly snapped into the dog's nose. The dog, its eyes growing brighter, snarled and attacked with greater vengeance.

Farrel jogged a hundred yards back to where he'd parked his car. He dove to the crossroads and got out to enter a public telephone booth. As he dialed, he felt his blood warming. He let the rings repeat until he heard the breathless, angry voice of Ecker : "Yeah?"

He assumed a nasal drawl which he'd practiced repeatedly through the week. "Rawl, Ecker."

"So?"

"Forget bringing in those supplies tomorrow morning."

"Why the hell not?"

"He doesn't want to be disturbed."

"All right! Let him starve."

"Hurry it up on those dogs."

"That's what I'm doing!" Ecker said.

He returned to his car as darkness began enveloping the community. The macadam leading in the direction of Martin Brindmart's land ran south in dipping curves. Farrel drove in that direction, passing the ranch, then turning right on another highway. When he reached the small road at the rear of the property where Vince Ecker had brought him the night of the hunt, he got out and opened the trunk to remove the rifle.

A cow was sounding in the distance, but he could not see it because of the increasing darkness. He moved swiftly over the tufted field, over a rise and into the small valley where the raccoon had been killed by the dogs. He walked over another rise and stopped beside the small, wind-shaped tree.

The windows of the house used by Cass Rawl were dark; he truly hoped that Rawl was gone. The wide window of the large main house was lighted. Feeling his nerves tingling, he saw that Martin Brindmart was reading in the chair near the desk and fireplace.

Farrel lifted the rifle and sighted through the scope. His heart was bumping. But he forced himself to hold the rifle steady. His finger squeezed. The report sounded cannon-like in his ears. The kick of the rifle spun him half-around. Then he looked again. Brindmart was slumped in the chair.

He hurried to his car and placed the rifle in the back seat. As he drove away, he was thinking that he might not have been able to shoot a deer, or a raccoon, or even a rabbit. But Brindmart was just another human being.

When he reached the edge of the community, he stopped the car off the highway. He put on leather gloves and quickly cleaned, then oiled the rifle. He returned it to the trunk, and minutes later parked

in front of the Copper Lantern. He was seated at the bar sipping a beer when Ecker arrived. Ecker ignored him and sat down angrily. "Damn, stupid dog!"

Farrel half-smiled. "How's the hunting, Ecker?"

"Might be all right if they knew how to make rifles!"

"Thought you said that Winchester was the best."

"Tried it this morning. I'd have done better with the carbine! It was off a mile! Had to fix it all over again!"

"Maybe now you can hit a raccoon clean enough to kill it," Farrel said drily.

"Raccoon! I'm going for the big stuff from now on."

"Like what?"

"Maybe go up to the Sierra and get a bear. Cat maybe. Maybe go down south and find a pig—I told you about them wild boars, didn't I?"

"Yes," Farrel said, and finished his beer. He walked outside and stood beside his car until another pulled away from the general store down the street. Then he put on the leather gloves again and exchanged the Winchester from the trunk with the one held by clamps in Ecker's pickup. He placed that in the back section of the Plymouth, on the floor, then drove down a winding road to Palo Alto. He crossed through town to the Dumbarton Bridge, where traffic was light. Halfway across, he stopped and leaned from a window to throw the rifle over a guardrail into the Bay.

AT TWENTY MINUTES to nine the next morning, he again stood inside the public telephone booth dialing Vince Ecker's number.

"Who?" Ecker demanded.

"Farrel."

"So?"

"You were talking about cats last night. I saw one down the highway."

Ecker's voice assumed immediate interest. "Where?"

"You know that little road that cuts off the highway just north of the road to Brindmart's place?"

"What kind of cat?"

"Big."

"Wildcat?"

"Looked bigger."

"*How* big?"

"Five feet long, maybe six."

He could hear Ecker's breath drawing in.

"Mean-looking," Farrel said. "Mountain lion, I figure. Maybe came down from the north. I ought to phone the sheriff. Animal like that—"

"You leave it to me, you hear? *I'll* take care of it! Small Creek Road, is that the place?"

"That's it."

Farrel drove south, meeting a single car. He turned onto the narrow length of blacktop marked Small Creek Road and stopped out of sight from the highway. Minutes

later Ecker's truck skidded to a halt behind the Plymouth. Ecker got out with his rifle held tightly in one large hand. He released three dogs from their compartment.

"Which way?" The sun glinted against his sun glasses.

"Down," Farrel said. "Through those trees, along the creek, toward the valley."

"Five, six feet?"

"Swear it was."

Ecker motioned his dogs ahead, and followed, running. Farrel waited until he hard them deep in the trees. Then, from a pocket, he drew a bottle of tan make-up purchased at a variety store; he smoothed it over his face. He fitted on a pair of ski-type sun glasses. Finally he removed from a foil-lined carton a black parka and a white medium-brimmed Stetson. He put them on and placed the carton on the right-hand side of the seat of Ecker's truck. He turned the key of the pickup and backed to the highway. Then he drove to the road leading to Martin Brindmart's fenced acreage.

When he neared the small house used by Cass Rawl, his palms had become so wet he could no longer hold on to the steering wheel. He stopped and put on his gloves. Then he forced himself to drive the truck to the gate. Through the dark glasses, he saw Rawl appear at the doorway of his house. Rawl glared at him; but the gate opened. Farrel drove through, breathing hard.

He stopped at a side door of the large house and carried the empty carton out of the truck. His worst moment arrived when he became certain that the door would be locked. It wasn't. He stepped inside and began looking for the room where Brindmart would be in that leather chair. After several tries, he found it.

He looked at the man—at what was left of him after the tearing slug from the high-powered rifle had created its destruction. Then he strode to the desk and located the lever beneath the corner. Paneling slid back. Farrel stared at the packets of currency stacked there. Finally, with shaking, gloved hands, he was able to transfer the packets into the carton. He looked around the room, feeling an increasing greed, and noticed a sheet of paper on the surface of the desk. He stepped closer and read the beginning of the note.

To Whom It May Concern,

I, Martin Brindmart, hereby reveal the following events . . .

He read no further, feeling a fresh panic. Had Brindmart somehow known that he'd been observed? Had Farrel been seen that night of the raccoon hunt? And had Brindmart written something . . . ?

Farrel grabbed the paper, folded it swiftly and slid it into an inner compartment of his wallet. He picked up the carton and returned to the truck. He did not look at Rawls' house as he drove through

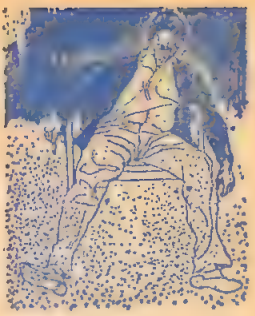
the gate. Through a rear-view mirror, he saw it closing behind him.

He reparked the truck where he'd met Ecker and carried the carton to the trunk of his car, where he placed it beside a small spade. He removed the sun glasses, parka and hat, put them in the carton and closed the trunk. He wiped his face with a handkerchief, then got behind the wheel of the Plymouth and drove back to the highway.

Following the undulating road, he drove fifteen miles south. He stopped on a turn-out in a heavily wooded area. When no other cars were in sight, he got out and retrieved the carton. He carried it with the spade into the woods. In a small clearing, he dug a deep hole, fitted the carton down, then scooped earth back and smoothed pine needles over the surface.

On the way home, he threw the spade and make-up stained handkerchief from the window. When he walked into his small cabin and sat down in his chair. He was exhausted. His mind went entirely blank. Milly kept complaining to him. But her voice seemed very far away, and the words she spoke were unintelligible.

ONE YEAR, two months and five days later, David Farrel sat near a window of a large stone house. Encircled by a corrugated steel fence, the structure had a fortress-like quality and blended smoothly with the flat Nevada sage-brush land.



Located well off the highway, outside Reno, Farrel could see nothing immediate but sage and brown earth and rock. In the distance, the bluish rise of mountains was fading in the wavering light of late afternoon.

He stood up feeling edgy; there were smudges of darkness beneath his eyes. He paced slowly through the silent house, from room to room, trying to find satisfaction in this haven and finding none.

He thought of going out to the front patio to sit for a while before the cold night sharpened the air. But he decided against it, as he had for weeks. A bit later he would have to walk out to the gate anyway, to see if there was mail. That would be enough exposure. You could never be certain. He knew what a good rifle could do at five hundred yards.

He sat down in his baroque living room and stared at a cold fireplace. He thought back, as he did every day, to how well it had gone, once Cass Rawl had decided to go into Martin Brindmart's house and

found him dead in the library. They arrested Vince Ecker two hours later. The next day a sheriff's detective had come to question Farrel at length. When Ecker's case had come to trial, Farrel had been required to go on the witness stand.

Ecker kept shouting his accusations; several times he had to be physically restrained. But Farrel had answered the questions in a polite, shy manner which, he knew, had suited the jury; his performance had been in complete contrast to Ecker's screaming and shouting.

"The defendant has made the claim, Mr. Farrel, that he was, in his words, framed—that you, in fact, fired the rifle that ballistic tests have proven to be the murder weapon."

"I'm aware of that."

"Is there any truth to it?"

"Certainly not."

Ecker, swearing, was in high fury, his face mottled with rage.

"It is the defendant's contention that you switched rifles in his truck, shot the deceased yourself from a hill, then tricked the defendant into trailing a non-existent cat of some description while you entered the fenced retreat of the deceased in the disguise of the defendant to steal valuables which might have been hidden behind paneling in the library. Did you?"

Farrel displayed a certain amount of incredulity at the proposition. "I've heard the contention, sir. I continue to be surprised by it. No, sir—nothing like that happened."

The cords of Ecker's neck bulged like taut ropes.

"You did not exchange rifles with the defendant?"

"I did not."

"You did not shoot the deceased?"

"I wouldn't kill a rabbit, sir, let alone Mr. Brindmart. I did not."

"You did not phone the defendant to explain that you'd seen a wild animal, which caused him to meet you at a location called Small Creek Road?"

"No, sir."

"You did not send the defendant on a chase after that animal, then disguise yourself in apparel similar to his and drive his truck onto the property of the deceased?"

"Certainly not."

"You did not see the defendant at all, that day?"

"Yes sir. As I was driving south on the highway near nine o'clock as I often do on a Saturday, I saw him drive his truck onto the road leading to the house of the deceased.

When his testimony had been completed, he'd smiled at the jury, then left the stand. He'd known fairly certainly that it was going to work when he'd heard the testimony of Cass Rawl.

"Please tell me, Mr. Rawl, are you absolutely certain that the driver of the truck who went

through the gate the day following the established murder time of the deceased was Vincent Albert Ecker?"

Farrel watched Cass Rawl's eyes shine with the hatred of the devoted servant who has lost his master at the hands of the enemy. Cass Rawl said, "Vince Ecker, all right."

He knew positively that it was going to work when the prosecuting attorney summarized his case by characterizing Ecker as a sadistic killer who would go to any means to accomplish his selfish mission—in this case, the theft of an undetermined amount of money, still unfound, because it had been hidden away by the defendant.

Ecker had put the finishing touch on the performance by shouting, accusing and raging in such a fashion that not a juror felt him to be anything but what he had been portrayed to be by the prosecution.

Farrel had hoped that he would be given the gas chamber. But Ecker had gotten a life sentence instead. That had been good enough anyway. Farrel had since learned that Ecker's performance in prison as a surly, hating, bullying, provocative inmate continually precluded any possibility for eventual parole.

FARREL STALKED into his library lined with every book he had ever wanted to read. But he had not been able to concentrate on anything these past weeks. He was nervous, feeling a growing fear of some unknown quantity which could destroy him. Yet he knew that was absurd. He had perfect protection here. He had not made the mistakes Brindmart had. He had refused to bring in dogs, because that would have required dependance upon a trainer. He allowed his supplies to be brought only to the gate and left outside until he picked them up—*no*body came through that gate but himself.

Yet, he had to walk through the open to reach that gate and collect supplies and mail. Each time that he was required to do it, his apprehension became greater.

He sat down and rubbed his palms over his knees. He'd also been thinking about women. Not Milly, certainly. He'd taken care of her easily, after Ecker had been sent to prison. He had picked up an easy brunette in the Copper Lantern, then began an obvious affair that had reached Milly's ears quickly, in that small community. She'd divorced him.

But, based on his book clerk's income, she had gotten very little from him. She'd remarried in a short time, and even that small alimony was no longer necessary. No, he did not want Milly. But any other woman. Yet how could he risk leaving this place to find one?

He tried not to think about that

by repeating his most familiar thoughts: reviewing the possibility of having made a mistake somewhere. The largest, he was certain, had been taking that sheet of paper from Martin Brindmart's desk.

He stood up again and resumed pacing, feeling his blood pumping. At first he had worried most about the condition of that money in the foil-lined carton. But when he had finally dug it up, he'd discovered that it had been preserved perfectly. Then he'd worried about demonstrating any sort of affluence by spending some of it. But he'd gotten the idea of moving to Reno, where he had claimed heavy winnings on small stakes, in the casinos. He had even declared the winnings on his income-tax report, and paid taxes on them. No one had questioned anything.

It all came back to having taken that note Brindmart had written. Because of the state of shock that had hit him that evening, he could not remember removing from his pocket the wallet which contained the note. But he must have, because it disappeared.

He recalled that he had demanded of Milly that she find it. But she could not. Finally he had looked at the moist, wicked face of Jolly, and realized that the baby had picked it up and hidden it somewhere. But up to the time of his divorce, he had not found where that was.

What, he asked himself, had been contained in the rest of that note? Where was it now? Who had read it? Would it be enough to implicate him? And did Milly have it, waiting to use it on him?

He turned on a transistor radio on a shelf, wanting to remove that thought. Then he switched the radio off immediately. Voices coming into this house and telling him of the outside world had ceased to interest him and only made him more nervous. He'd also cancelled his newspaper subscription weeks ago.

He paced again, thinking of all he had planned to do if he should ever gain the seclusion and independence owned by Martin Brindmart. Now that he had achieved them, he could concentrate on nothing. He had even begun to hate his once-loved animals, which had become hated sounds in the night. Rabbits. Coyotes. Wildcats. Mountain lions. Prowling and searching, padding, climbing, causing him to lie in his bed with sweat beading on his forehead and his nerves trembling.

All he could honestly think of was having made a mistake somewhere, leaving a small gate open, something that would bring destruction down on him . . .

At the near gloom of twilight, he stood beside a window and peered toward the highway as the red mail truck stopped beside his box on the other side of the gate. He watched

the carrier, who was a slope-shouldered man with a reddish mustache, deposit something. The man had, in the beginning, tried to stall until Farrel came out to inspect that box. But Farrel would have none of it. Even now the man looked curiously and hopefully toward the house, as though Farrel might come out. Oh, yes? Farrel thought.

The truck finally rolled on. Farrel tried to get up his nerve for his daily forage outside. Then he walked to the heavy front door, which he kept locked and bolted—he well remembered that Martin Brindmart had failed to do that. He stood there, feeling a familiar weakness going through him. His palms became moist. Finally he slid the bolt, then turned the handle. He pushed the door open and stepped out.

He looked across the expanse of white-graveled drive that he would have to traverse in order to reach the gate. Then he would have to unlock that gate and hurry out to check the contents of the mailbox, all of which had become a nearly unbearable task these past days. But his curiosity was too strong. The mailman had placed something in there. It might be a bill. Or it might only be junk mail. But he had to know.

He ran along the gravel to the gate and inserted a key into the lock. He turned it, then jumped out to yank the lid of the box down. He grabbed a small package wrapped in brown paper, seeing that it had been addressed to him in Milly's familiar hand.

He returned through the gate, kicked it shut and locked it, then trotted back toward the house. When he had nearly reached the door, he was certain that he saw something moving beyond the fence to the east. He stopped, heart speeding. There was a clumping of sage there. Whatever it had been he was certain, had moved behind that protection. But the light, now, was deceiving. He broke into a run and leaped into the house to close the door behind him and bolt it.

He threw the package on a sofa, then hurried to an east window. He looked out, his face by the sill. But he could see nothing.

Imagination, he thought. Or something harmless, like a jackrabbit. He returned to the sofa and sat down, not assured.

He picked up the package and looked at it more carefully to see that it was correctly addressed. Well, he had made no effort to go into absolute hiding—he'd given a forwarding address to the small post office in that crossroads community. If he had tried to disappear entirely, it would definitely have been suspicious. She'd probably inquired of the postmistress, and gotten the address that way.

He tore the brown paper away from a flat pasteboard box. He opened it to see his wallet. He re-

moved it, as a small white card fell away. He read the message:

David,

I found this when I was cleaning the house, as George and I are moving to much larger quarters. It was inside the register of the heater in the living room, where I guess Jolly put it, sliding it down a vent. As you will notice, there are only two dollars inside, which I did not touch. I am sending it not out of any respect for you, as you hurt me, all right. But because it has your various cards you were so upset about losing. I am only trying to be honorable, no matter how much anguish you have caused me.

Yours truly,
Milly.

He opened the compartment which contained his various cards. Then he looked inside the second compartment where he'd placed the note from Brindmart's desk. He pulled out the folded paper. Had she opened that compartment too, to find this?

He threw the wallet aside and got up with the paper. He walked in a fast circle around the room. Then he hurried to his library where he switched on a desk light and sat down to read:

To Whom It May Concern,

I, Martin Brindmart, hereby reveal the following events, beginning with the decline of my partner, Albert Henshaw. It was true that Albert engaged in dishonest measures which profited him greatly, at the expense of many innocent people—as was stated in his suicide note found beside his body in his car where he died of carbon-monoxide poisoning.

What is not true is that he later filtered away those profits, as was stated in his note. What is not true is that I knew nothing of his dealings. What is not true is that he willingly committed suicide.

I discovered his manipulations, after which time I confronted Albert with my knowledge. By threatening exposure of him, to his wife, to his daughter, to his son, to his friends, I was able to extract the whereabouts of that money. By working on his shame and guilt, I was also able to get him drunk, after which I carried him to his garage and placed him in the car. It will be remembered that a large percentage of alcohol was found in Albert's blood as well as a half-consumed bottle beside him in the death car. But Albert was intoxicated before the car's engine was started—by me.

I have since experienced an increasing torment for that deed. The money, first gained by Albert, is tainted money. It has made me a prisoner in this hated stockade I have created in these wretched hills. I have received nothing but hell in exchange. Secluding myself in this fashion—afraid, afraid, nerves nearly shot—I damn the money and all it has caused. All that I desire now, as Albert did

before me, is some release from my torment. I invite, welcome any release . . .

The handwriting became nearly illegible near the end; the letter had not been completed.

Farrel continued to stare at the words. Then he stood up suddenly, eyes shining with fear. Milly *had* read it, he thought.

Yet—why had she sent it to him? Giving the evidence away that he had been in Brindmart's house? Then he nodded quickly, a muscle flickering along a cheek. She was playing with him. Like Ecker, playing with a wounded raccoon. Sadistic. Devilish . . .

He whirled, hearing something moving outside. He ran to the window and yanked the cord to snap the drapes shut.

His mouth had turned dry. He tried to swallow and could not. *Ecker* he thought, reaching that absolute and inevitable conclusion he should have reached months ago. *You couldn't cage a man like that; somehow, some way . . .*

He switched off the desk lamp and stood in the darkness, shaking with a strong chill.

His hearing for any alien sound had become acute. Now he heard something very alien: someone running out there. He fell to the floor and pressed his cheek tightly against the rug. He listened, shaking badly, licking his dry lips. But now there was only silence.

Slowly he crawled toward the

shelf where the transistor radio rested. He reached up and turned on the switch. Soft music played through the room. He lay shaking very badly now. The music stopped abruptly and a man's voice said, "There have been no further developments on the escape of a convicted killer believed to have fled to this area . . ."

As his hand jerked up to turn up the volume, the radio was jarred from the shelf. It crashed to the floor and the voice was gone.

He pressed his cheek against the rug again, breathing hard, listening.

He should have known that he could never have defeated an animal like that. It was like trying to defeat a wild boar, as Ecker had so often described: you shot to kill, and if it didn't work, it came looking for you, tracking you, mean and vicious.

Farrel began to whimper, eyes hot with tears. He thought of Mar-

tin Brindmart's written words: "I damn the money and all it has caused . . ."

Cheek to rug, lying flat beside the desk, he envisioned the special womb he had created for it with his own hands: a trap-doored recess right there beneath the desk.

He heard that sound of running again, closer now. He whimpered once more, shaking violently.

Finally he rolled to his stomach, then began inching closer to the desk. He slid his trembling fingers along the grain of the rug, searching. He found the clasps that held the fabric flat, loosened them, then peeled the rug back. He managed to find a key in his pocket and inserted it into a heavy lock built into the oak planking of the floor. He turned the key and lifted the trap door. He began removing packets of currency.

At last he pushed himself up to his knees, then to his feet. He stood swaying drunkenly, holding one of the packets. He staggered to the drape cord and yanked it. The drapes were drawn open with a thin, whistling sound. With his free hand, he reached out and switched on the ceiling lights, bathing himself in hard, white brightness.

Gasping for breath, eyes wild, he unlatched the window and threw it open, staring into the darkness. "Ecker?" He listened and heard nothing. He held up the packet of money and shook it, wanting only to be free of his torment. *"Vince Ecker!"*

He saw the muzzle flash. He did not hear the explosion.

Dusty, thick-soled shoes stopped beside the bloodied body. A stub-fingered hand gathered up the packets of currency. A pulpy, ultimately cruel face creased with a smile.

Minutes later David Farrel was alone in his house.

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Please print **August—67**

THE WAY IT WAS

by TOM H. MORIARTY

"He is our enemy, and yours," the man told him. "You will shoot, and shoot to kill. If you fail you will die. But you will not fail." And if you succeed, *he said silently,* you die also—quickly!

ROD SORCE'S Chev was a real old heap, a brindle bathtub framed in rusting chrome, but Harv Hidell was happy to have the loan of it regardless. Without it tonight, he would not have been able to make this try for fifty dollars. A fellow could not count on a successful getaway if he had to walk to catch the nearest bus.

As he drove around the looping streets of this luxurious residential suburb of Oil Center, seeking the back service alley to the Queller mansion, Harv Hidell considered how he could thank Rod Sorce. With some kind of special gift? Box of cigars, lighter, or carton of ciggies?

It was damned nice of Rod Sorce to have put him in touch with this nutball, this rich man willing to pay fifty skins just to prove that a man could aim a rifle. Aim it where he wanted the bullet to go, that is. A screwball if there ever was one.

Hidell noted the eight-foot hedge ahead, slowed down, switched off the headlights, and steered the Chev down a gravel road on which were alternate tool sheds, garages, and trash cans. He put on the brakes at a gardener's shed on which the name Queller was painted on the door.

He moved the transmission out of gear, latched in the emergency brake, and allowed the steady old motor to run at idle.

From the floor of the back compartment of Sorce's roomy old car, Hidell now lifted up an oil cloth covering and pulled out the rifle concealed there.

The rifle was a bolt-action Mauser-type known to the experts as a six-point-five Mannlicher-Carcano. A standard telescopic sight was mounted on the gun barrel.

Hidell took a single cartridge from his coat pocket, inserted it in the firing chamber, and shot the bolt shut.

Stealth then came into every

movement of his body, an easy thing for youth to summon. For he was twenty-four; five feet six inches tall; and a trim one-hundred-and-fifty pounds in weight. Hatless, his dark brown hair was touseled, much in need of barbering.

His most handsome feature, going well with deep-set eyes, was a trick, straight nose, looking as if once broken and molded fatter in the healing.

With the rifle at the port, out front, he moved silently up close to the hedge. There he found a small opening that revealed the view beyond. He began to study the activities going on behind several squares of dim light from windows of the mansion.

In a frame of light on the first floor, the huge bulk of Senator Beaumont Queller came to view, seated on a davenport beside a reading lamp.

The senator's profile was his trademark. Most everybody in Oil Center knew it well: reddish mane of hair, bright-weathered face, massive hambone of a chin. The man held a paper some two feet from his eyes, in the manner of a person who cannot read small type at close range but is too vain to wear glasses.

Harv Hidell raised his rifle, nested the stock in his right shoulder socket, rested the barrel on a thick limb in the hedge, sighted the cross-hairs of the telescopic sight upon the noble head bathed in light about fifty yards ahead, then adjusted precisely to where he wanted his bullet to go—and squeezed the trigger.

A sharp crack of noise sounded. Without checking his results, Harv ran to the Chev, slung the rifle in the back compartment and slapped the oilcloth over it. Then he released the emergency brake, gunned the gas pedal, raced out of the back road into the next loop of the street, and headed away.

After a full block had passed, he switched on the headlights. He looked in the rear view mirror. No other vehicle was on the street. He slowed down and like any other law-abiding citizen drove out of the residential park.

His pulse raced with the excitement of the shot, his first at a live target. In the Marines, his enlistment had come between wars, so he had never known battle and live targets.

Forty minutes later, Hidell parked the Chev on a Skid Row street in town, in front of Rod Sorce's rooming house.

He knocked twice at Rod's door, repeated the knock two more times. This was the Morse Code letter S, on which they had agreed as an signal at the door.

He opened the door, coming upon a somber young fellow who looked a bit like Hidell himself. Which was not an unusual thing, for Sorce was twenty-five years

old, five feet seven inches, and weighed one-hundred-and-forty-five. His shock of hair was darker than Hidell's, but it was carelessly parted on the left side. The open blue shirt, the Cordovan leather belt, the soiled brown corduroy slacks were also the same.

Their outfits were not deliberately so, but were merely reflecting the current popular tastes of young men around Oil Center.

"Did you qualify?" said Sorce.

"Six inches off the point of his nose," Hidell said. "Just like the man said he wanted it."

"How did the senator take it?" said Sorce. "Like maybe jumping out of his pants, like my guy did?"

"Didn't stop to find out," said Hidell. "All I know is I got him in the cross-hairs, then adjusted left, then got my tail out of that alley."

Hidell poured himself a drink from a pint of rye whisky on Sorce's lone table, put down the belt in one long slosh, and sat down in a gathering glow of well-being.

He said, "Have you figured out yet, Rod, who the old goat with the whiskers really is?" He meant a distinguished-looking gentleman of fifty-plus years, wearing a leather-fringed Western go-to-meeting suit—a man who had given his name simply as "Jones" when he propositioned the two young men consecutively—first Sorce, and several days later, on Sorce's recommendation, Hidell.

"He could be one of them oil wildcatters," said Sorce. "There's nothing screwier than a wildcatter. Up to jokes and larks, fooling their friends. Who else would want to have a man shot at but missed? Not that I would have gone along with him if he wanted to shoot a man dead. I don't believe in shooting a man dead for no purpose. Makes you feel shook up bad enough with a purpose."

Hidell considered the words, had no immediate reaction, kept quiet. He had Sorce pegged for a tough customer, that was all.

Soon he said, "Here's your car keys. Thanks for the loan. I'll be seeing you soon, buster."

Sorce waved, smiled, said nothing. Hidell left.

At the curb, Hidell wrapped the oilcloth around the rifle in the Chev back compartment; then carried the package along lightly. It looked somewhat like a package of curtain rods.

In five minutes, in another fringe section of Skid Row, Hidell turned in to a dirty street. At his flat, a postcard and an advertising circular awaited in the hall box. The postcard, from his wife Brea, was addressed to "Mester Harvos A. Hidell."

He read the message, while grimacing: "Dear Havros how you feelings we all fine babby walking now hop see you soon. Lov Brea."

Hiddell appeared bushed and forlorn, as now reflexed by the

mail. He realized again that his marriage had been a sad mistake. If only there was some way to send her and the baby back to her home in Europe. For that matter, even he could be happy going with her, where she had friends to take up her time. Here, Hidell just could not seem to land a job paying enough to allow for baby care and for Brea to attend school and thus qualify to work herself.

He could not land such a job because he had very little schooling himself. The situation made him feel trapped and full of hate for every young guy with a smile on his face.

In his room, Hidell shoved the rifle under his cot. Then he turned in. For the first time he noted that his left hand was still shaking slightly, out of control. He judged that he had strained muscles at the hedge.

Who actually was Jones? Was there a chance that Jones might pull a double-cross and report him to the police? He went to sleep with that edgy thought whipping in his mind.

The next evening, upon return from a day's dull work at the tools warehouse building of the city public works department, Harv Hidell was given an opportunity to see a bit closer behind the facade of Mr. Jones.

The man came to his quarters. He wore the same buckskin-fringed suit as on his first appearance. What seemed a knowing smile was on his lean old face. He put a copy of the evening newspaper into Harv Hidell's hands.

"You earned your money," the man said. "I'll take Senator Queller's word for your performance." Then he laughed softly, as at a joke.

The headline story in the newspaper was about an attempt to kill Senator Beaumont Queller, at his home in Oil Center.

"The would-be assassin's bullet sped past the senator's head, missing him by inches, and imbedded in the wall of his living room," an excerpt read. The news article then detailed the senator's achievements and connections, including his former role as founder of the multi-million dollar Queller Oil Refineries.

The near-victim was quoted as saying, "This attempt on my life has to be the work of a crackpot Leftist who hates me for my devotion to the patriotic principles of our nation. If this person makes another attempt, I warn him now, he will be shot down in his tracks by me or by a posse which the sheriff of this county has placed at my service night and day until my return to Washington."

"What was this for? To get him more votes?" said Hidell. He had heard of politicians setting up events in order to produce a crowd-reaction favorable to their cause.

"Maybe you will find out tonight, young fellow," said Jones. "Come with me. Some people want to have a look-see at you. You have done well."

Harv did not object. The old bird looks harmless enough, he thought. Who else passed out fifty dollar bills like they were Blue Chip stamps?

The car driven by Jones to the Skid Row place was a Phinxa, a banker's hot rod type—a souped-up stickshift import job seating two passengers and selling for $7500. Hidell had never ridden in a Phinxa before. The soft feel of the black full-leather upholstery enchanted him.

He experienced this delight when blindfolded, for that is what happened several miles beyond city limits. Jones stopped, adjusted the handkerchief, said he had orders to do that, and drove on.

Hidell was surprised, however, that they drove so far. He found himself, handkerchief removed, twenty or so miles north of Oil Center, on a paved private road.

Jones tromped the car up briefly to an even eighty on the speedometer before decelerating and turning in to the only house on any horizon: a big, wandering split-level semi-ranchhouse set in an oasis of cottonwood and poplar trees.

Hidell noted a neat sign at the parking concourse in front of the big house. In gold letters on black,

it read "Benson Library. Devoted to the Archives of the Southwest Empire of Northern America."

Not having gone beyond the tenth grade in high school, Harv Hidell had no great curiosity about the name, nor any wonderment that he had never heard of it before.

His sponsor Jones now took him past a black-uniformed man of middle age and husky build, in through a rich foyer to a large room.

"Sit down here and wait," said Jones as he left.

Hidell judged that he was waiting in some kind of conference room. A broad table with chairs around it, was in the middle, with accommodations for perhaps thirty. Eight large oil paintings decorated the walls. Hidell judged them to be the works of some early artist visitor to the plains, mountains, and valleys of the West. Cattle drives and oil derrick drilling fig-

ured as subject matter in four of the colorful paintings.

A door squeaked in back of him and Harv Hidell swung around. He saw Jones leading in six men who were clothed in flowing purple robes. On their heads were purple peaked hoods. The face of each robed man was hidden by a scrap of gauze and a white domino eye-mask.

If it had not been for the trace of smile on Jones's face, and the fact that the robed men moved somewhat slowly, suggesting age, Harv Hidell admitted to himself that he would have been plenty scared. It reminded him of Ku Klux Klan pictures he had seen in the papers.

It also made him speculate that he could be among the fabled oil millionaires of the region—men whose holdings here and throughout the world reportedly returned them almost unbelievable sums, such as a million dollars after taxes every day. One of those men put up the money for radio broadcasts every night of the week on United States stations, people said, to tell how he felt about the people running Washington.

The robed men sat down at the long table. Jones directed Hidell to stand opposite them, across the table.

"You have proved you can carry out orders," one of the robed men said.

Another took up the examination, saying, "Mr. Jones, is this man Mr. Hidell?"

"Yes," said Jones. "The other was Sorce. Rodney Sorce. This is Sorce's friend, Harvos A. Hidell."

The man in purple, who had spoken first, now said, "Mr. Hidell, you are wondering who we are. That is why we brought you here, to learn a little about us and see for yourself that you are in safe hands.

"Mr. Hidell, you have seen the name of our Foundation on the building. We are a legal foundation. Our honorable purpose is to carry on the sacred aims of our ancestors, who banded together for the preservation of certain God-given rights when those rights were taken away a long time ago.

"There are not many of us, but personal character has made us strong. These robes, which may have surprised you, are not worn to strike fear into any man; they are merely the traditional council-manic robes of those few members with power to govern in our society. We are masked because we govern secretly. Our empire and its activities are known only to a few.

"You are associated with us now and we intend to reward you handsomely, as we have rewarded certain others. In return, we demand complete secrecy on your part. Keep in mind that we are first and last patriots, dedicated to saving the lands and privileges won by our forefathers. To accomplish

our goal, we operate outside Federal and State governments, but we do not oppose them openly. In fact, we are part of both governments and helped establish them long ago. In the rooms of this library building are the archives of the patriots, going back to our founding days as a fraternal brotherhood in the eighteen seventies after the War Between the States. We personally preserve these hallowed documents.

"We and those before us have managed our affairs well. Some times we are active in protective measures, as now, and some times we are dormant.

"We are most active when we are threatened. A person might not be aware of it, but we own or control a great part of the money, of the people, of the activities of business and education in our great empire. Most people in Oil Center, well-to-do or not, undoubtedly would deny our existence, call it a myth. Nevertheless, we do enforce our will in our own special ways when we so desire, through chosen representatives behind the scenes."

Hidell was overwhelmed at the brand new idea of a secret empire with agents able to put their hands on him and test him. He remained quiet, fascinated.

The spokesman continued, saying, "Now, we have chosen you and your friend Sorce to join us in helping preserve our rightful holdings of oil and cattle, of products of ranch and factory. We found your names and records in the police files of several agencies, you may care to know. We have tested you. You satisfied us as to your skill.

"Soon we will have another test for you, a test of your courage as well as your skill. You may ask, why me? Why not someone else? It is because we require a man of certain background, such as yours —a man with former military service and with curiosity about the governments of other countries. You showed yourself to be such an adventurer. So we tested you. Now we choose you for this new important task. This time we will pay you $25,000 upon successful completion of the new assignment. What is your comment, Mr. Hidell?"

Harv Hidell had never before been addressed as Mister by any person of obvious riches or importance. He was tremendously flattered. If this was an opportunity to join forces in some way with the moneyed people, Hidell intended to grab it.

He said swiftly, "Tell me what you want me to do. It's a privilege to serve you, sir."

A buzz of pleasure came from the nodding heads of the six robed men.

Then the spokesman continued, saying, "Mr. Hidell, this time we want you to shoot to hit. Not to miss. When you missed the sena-

tor—on orders—you proved that your eye and nerves were steady. You see, we merely wanted to shake up the senator, for reasons of our own. According to the papers, we have accomplished that. Now, if you can miss on purpose, then you can hit the bull's eye on purpose. And, of course, under genuine tension and stress."

Hidell was thinking only of the fantastic fortune—twenty-five grand—that awaited. He said quickly, "I am ready. Who's the target?"

"The chief political enemy of the Southwest Empire of Northern America—when he comes to Oil Center."

"Will Rod Sorce be part of this deal, sir?" said Hidell. He feared that he might have to split the $25,000 with Sorce.

"Sorce will be your assistant this time—the one to help you in any way with advance preparations. Mr. Sorce will be paid ten thousand dollars for his services as assistant. But you are not to discuss with him the amount of your payment, that is, twenty-five thousand dollars. You are number one because you are the better shot. When Rodney Sorce was tested, he put his bullet through the admiral's cap, almost killing him. His instructions were the same as yours, a foot to three inches left of the head."

The men in purple robes now arose and filed out, with a wave of the hand from the spokesman, in the manner of remanding the young man back to his operations commander.

Jones took Hidell in tow, blindfolding him in the parking concourse and sitting him down in the leather seat of the Phinxa. About ten miles down the road, out of sight of any houses on the horizon, Jones stopped, removed the handkerchief, and continued on into Oil Center.

"Get together with Sorce and start your plans," said Jones. "The route of your target will be the street outside the public works warehouse building, heading west. Make your plans accordingly. Remember, the twenty-five thousand dollars is yours if you are successful—if you hit and kill this chief political enemy. If you don't, if you miss, then the consequences are yours to take. Police, prison, the rope. Better get started, Mr. Hidell."

Whapped around by cops, fed on slops in a crowded stinking tank, consigned to Death Row. Harv Hidell thought about these chilling things now for the first time. He thought, too, that they could happen regardless—if he were caught after he hit.

"Might've known it," he said out loud. His thoughts were more explicit.

There was a catch to the easy fifty, a catch that had been glossed over, left for him to realize. There

was only one thing, therefore, to do while the doing was good. That was to get together with Rod Sorce and seriously work at their mutual problem of qualifying for their pay and of disappearing after the kill.

He said to Sorce that night, in the latter's room, "We have to double-check this mail-order telescopic sight. Maybe it isn't zeroed-in right for a hundred yards. You take it to the gunsmith."

Sorce interrupted, saying, "It's your piece and you're the trigger man this time. You take it."

"Wait a minute," said Hidell. "The men at the library said you are assigned to assist me. You have to earn your ten grand, just like I do."

Sorce changed his attitude at once, saying, "Yes, you're right. When can I pick up the rifle?"

Hidell judged that his buddy had been pleasantly surprised at the mention of a specific amount of money.

They went over additional matters: the choice of a perch in the upper stories of the red-brick tool building; how Sorce would gain admittance to the building on the appointed morning, after the first coffee break, and how he could keep out of the boss's way until noon; how Sorce would monitor radio coverage by transistor so that Hidell would be at his post in time with the rifle, ready to shoot; the route to be taken in exiting from the building together, driving the Chev to Sorce's flat, and stocking up food and smokes for a three-day stay in Sorce's room.

Harv Hidell left his companion after more than an hour of talk, during which time Rod Sorce was entirely cooperative, even to making a check list of things to be done. As a result, Hidell felt better about his partner and the judgment of the six confident men in the library.

An assistant, unknown to the department of public works in its personnel records, was an absolute necessity, Hidell decided. Sorce made possible a contact with Jones and the purple robed men after the job was done. Sorce could drive around town without risk of being stopped by police. He could contact Jones publicly and make arrangements to drive to the ranch house library. There, they could pick up their pay and carry out plans to get lost over the border or by going direct to some nearby country where an underground welcome was assured.

Sorce seemed to know about several places where no questions would be asked, including Cuba. Sorce was really well informed on the politics of the oddball countries.

On the very next day, the morning paper carried a map and time schedule of the parade route to be taken by civic officials and The Target. Nowhere in the paper was Oil Center's distinguished visitor described as "the chief political

enemy of the Southwest Empire of Northern America."

The description of the robed men was therefore ready-made to ease Hidell's emerging conscience. For, the nearer he came to the day of scheduled assassination, the more ashamed he had secretly grown about his connection with it. No school book to his knowledge had ever downgraded any person elected by the people to run the national government. The narrow-minded element of Oil Center seemed a tiny percentage of the whole population, just like in most any other city of the nation.

Hidell wondered if such people as he had met in the big room at the ranch house were the ones who had printed up the "Wanted—Dead or Alive" posters, with photo of their chief political enemy, which appeared tacked to walls and poles around Oil Center. They probably were, he decided, for the poster went beyond the usual joke stuff which got a laugh when people saw themselves "wanted" like an early times cattle rustler.

But calming his brief misgivings most was the thought that the men at the library were real nice people: they had elevated him to terms of equality. To him, the sum of $25,000 was all the money any man in the world could hope to keep for himself in one chunk. He considered that $25,000 would even pay for a Phinxa and leave plenty left over.

He could slip a grand to Brea and the kid so they would have no problems over the rent and groceries. Still there would be plenty left on which to live it up somewhere in the world under a different name.

ROD SORCE came to Hidell in the tool warehouse building a little after twelve.

"The motorcade has left the airport," he said. "Everything's set up for you on the sixth floor."

"I'll go up now," said Hidell. "Are the men still on the sixth floor, putting in the new flooring?"

"They knock off for lunch in a few minutes. They're going downstairs to see the man drive by."

"Okay, Rod. I'll see you next at the elevator. Be sure to hold that elevator for me on the sixth."

"Okay. Don't lose your cool, buster."

Harvos A. Hidell then left his work desk, took the automatic elevator to the sixth floor, went to the agreed corner window and set up his rifle-rest, on some cartons in which spare parts had been shipped.

In about twenty minutes, he heard the voice of Rod Sorce from back down the corridor, say, "Almost here."

Then he heard a gathering crackle of police escort motorcycles.

He sighted through the crosshairs of the scope, caught his moving target in the open automobile,

and squeezed the trigger. In two and a fraction seconds each, he cranked back the bolt handle twice and squeezed the trigger twice. Three shots in all. Then he shoved the rifle behind a cluster of cartons and dashed back to the elevator.

Sorce and the elevator were not there.

Hidell yelped in fright and ran to the nearby stairs. Sorce had panicked, had taken off at the first blast of the rifle, Hidell judged. But there was no time now to think about the foul-up.

He clattered down the steep stairs, unit after unit, went out the back door at the ground level, and into the street. Knots of people were there, mostly speechless amid the scream of many sirens and the angry racket of police motorcycles.

In the employee parking lot, Sorce's old heap was gone. Hidell walked by the empty spot and continued on out. In the next fifteen minutes, he covered the distance to his room by bus, cab, and on foot, when intermittently stopped by congesting traffic.

He hurried into his flat, traded his sport coat of ivory white for a dark blue suit-coat. He put on a little-used brown felt hat. In that way, he would present a different appearance, he reasoned hastily, should the tool warehouse manager miss him and report his statistics and clothes to questioning police.

He now started walking the few blocks to Rod Sorce's room on the Skid Row street. Only by going to Sorce could he duck out of sight at this time of danger and later hope to get a safe ride to the ranch house.

As Harv Hidell walked away from his flat, he unknowingly walked away from two men who waited in a Phinxa roadster down the street. The men were Mr. Jones, at the wheel of the sports car, and Rod Sorce, whose old Chev was parked in back of the Phinxa.

"He's heading over my way," said Sorce.

"Fine. We'll circle around and get there first. Then, you know what we'll do, young fellow? We'll tip off the first prowl car we see, tell him here comes a man looking just like the police band described the suspect. Harv Hidell—"

"Perfect," said Sorce.

Near to five minutes later, in the vicinity of Sorce's flat, a squad car came along the street. Jones hailed it. The police car cut over to the right side and stopped.

"Officer, I just now saw a guy—walking down there a piece in a blue coat—that looks like the one they just described on the police band. Hidell, it was. My car's equipped for police calls. I heard this guy's wanted. Emergency like."

"Thanks," said the officer. "Down there? Okay, thanks." The policeman ran back to his car, U-

turned in the street, and drove back fast.

In the rear vision mirror, Sorce saw the police car stop, the officer get out—that, in the act of calling to someone on the sidewalk, fall down in the street from a shot. Next, he saw Hidell run across the street and cut through a used car lot.

"He's as good as caught," said Jones. "Let's get out of here."

The Phinxa headed for the highways leading out of town.

"Are you going to the Benson Library?" said Sorce.

"Right. So you can draw your pay, young fellow."

"What of Harv? Now we're in a different kind of trouble. When a cop gets killed, watch out. They'll surely make him talk."

Jones said, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Let's see what the people at the library have to say about that."

In spite of this new, closer association as a confederate in eliminating Hidell, Sorce learned that he was not yet fully accepted by his superior. As before, he had to submit to being blindfolded some few miles before the Phinxa arrived at the big ranchhouse. Nevertheless, Sorce was not burned up about it. He was relieved and grateful to be clear of the Hidell connection and the threat of arrest as accessory to murder.

The disguised men in the purple robes were seated in the conference room when Sorce and Jones walked in under escort of a black-uniformed guard. A 24-inch color TV set was turned on, facing them across the long table. The TV station was running off a tape on the gala parade of their chief political enemy through the downtown streets of Oil Center. Cheering echoed, faces smiled by the thousands, hands waved in a great outpouring of affection for the man and his wife in the open tonneau. Oil Center was unanimously proud to be host, it was obvious.

"Turn down the volume," the spokesmen of the robed men said quietly.

Jones adjusted the set so that the noise of hearty welcome faded down and conversation could be heard in the room.

"Hidell has killed a policeman and has been caught," said the robed spokesman. "Why did you allow him to kill a policeman?"

"We did not know he was armed," said Jones.

"He must have got the pistol when he went to his room to change clothes," said Sorce.

"Yes, indeed," said one of the robed men, sarcastically, "he got the pistol, Mr. Sorce. But he got it in order to go over to your room and shoot you."

The man banged his fist on a hand-drawn map on the table, a map which crudely recorded Harv Hidell's route from tool warehouse building, to his room, then towards

Sorce's address when stopped by police car. Some other agent of the robed men had evidently reported the route of Hidell, Sorce decided. As the spokesman had indicated, the Empire bosses were on top of everything that happened in Oil Center.

"This crazy man must be taken care of," the spokesman now said flatly. "If he is not killed in his cell, no telling what he will divulge. And there's such a thing as truth serum, of course. Top government power may take him from local custody, then force a confession out of him by drugs or hypnosis. Mr. Sorce, you are best equipped among us to dispose of this man Hidell."

Another purple robe spoke up, saying, "Why not the poison pill method, the one we discussed some time ago?"

"Yes, it would work and leave no evidence. No trouble for Mr. Sorce to carry a few pellets, like gum, into the police station. Then our lawyer—" Here the speaker nodded to Jones "—can demand a visitation by Hidell's friend Sorce."

The image on the television screen changed abruptly as the man talked. So marked was the change, from the tape of the parade to a new live scene from the police department, that the spokesman ordered the set's volume turned up, so that all could see the newest development in the

incredible unfolding of the downtown tragedy.

In the TV scene, two officers appeared, escorting Harv Hidell. The TV commentator's voice explained that Hidell was being moved to another jail in Oil Center. The prisoner walked stiffly, his wrists in handcuffs. He looked warily ahead. On either side of the lane, reporters and hangers-on were lined, full on the TV camera eye.

A shadow moved out of the left lower side of the screen. A fedora hat showed on screen. A burly shoulder. A hand with a gun protruded below. The gun withdrew. Hidell cringed, buckled, fell. Thrashing bodies obscured the camera momentarily.

"He's shot," said Jones. "Somebody's killed Hidell."

After near ten tense seconds, the spokesman of the robed men said," Some amateur has done the

job for us. We never counted on that."

Sorce judged that by amateur the robed man meant most anybody among the hundreds of thousands who had lined the city streets to cheer the man in the open car.

The spokesman now continued, saying, "Gentlemen, our cause is favored by another good omen. All goes well. We are closer to the great empire. Now, Mr. Sorce, your reward will be paid. Do you have the money ready, Mr. Jones?"

"I have it in my office safe in Oil Center, sir. The sum of twenty-five thousand dollars. In other words, what was to have been paid to Hidell."

"Good. Now, Mr. Sorce, you will go to Mexico City and report to an address which Mr. Jones will give you. When you reach there, we have decided, you will be given another twenty-five thousand dollars. Reward for your loyalty and efficiency, a job well done. From that address, our representative will see that you get air transportation to any country of your choice. There are several countries where you need not be bothered the rest of your life."

Rod Scorce gulped his unexpected pleasure at the words. Nonetheless, he was practical enough to envision the disadvantages of driving down to Mexico City in his old heap of a car. He wondered how he could go about buying a better car without exciting suspicion. Oil Center could be expected to remain a town of seething, dangerous suspicion for some time.

He said, "Would someone help me to get a better car from my trip? That could be a problem for a guy like me right now."

Mr. Jones spoke up, saying, "No problem. You take this car of mine after we get to town. What's a car between friends? I wanted the later model Phinxa anyway."

Rod Sorce thanked the people warmly, then left with Jones. In the patio, he was blindfolded, now a routine act, and soon felt the powerful car throbbing along the high-speed private road.

Such a quiet ride this precision mechanism gave, Sorce considered. What a thrill of thrills to think it would soon be his to drive —at least until he reached Mexico City.

Too bad for Harv Hidell, he thought. Harv had been such a king-size sucker. A babe-in-the-woods kind of guy with—what did they call it? Delusions of grandeur?

At this point in his journey to new splendor, Jones said, "Here is where we take off that blindfold, young fellow. How would you like to drive her, since she's going to be yours?"

Jones steered off the road and came to a stop by a gully run-off. Rod Sorce jumped out and ran

around the rear end to take over the wheel.

His grin switched to blank bafflement at what he came upon. He saw the black hole of a blue gun barrel as big as a well in front of him. And beyond it he saw the pitiless hard eyes of the man called Mr. Jones.

"What you doing?" yelled Sorce. Then he froze physically, could not move even an eyelash quiver.

"Order is orders," came the answer. "Sorry, kid, you ain't needed around here any more."

The blast of the .45 was fantastically loud to Rod Sorce. The muzzle velocity of the bullet was so great that he was punched back into the brush. He flopped down like a wet sack into the gully below the level of the road.

Nonetheless, by a trick of the bullet's entry and lodgment, Sorce lived briefly after that. Paralyzed.

As a man might hunch at a parapet and watch, Sorce saw the beautiful Phinxa roadster wheel around and dart away, back towards the ranch house. Sorce eased out of his treacherous world while watching the car's plume of dust settle in a dirty veil far down the private road.

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A WHIFF OF BITTER ALMONDS

Somewhere in the dark woods two men waited, with stolen money in their bags and black murder in their souls. He had a very simple job—to pick them up and still stay alive!

by BOB WARK

I WAS LEANING back in my chair with my feet on the desk pull-out, nursing an early morning glass of brandy, when the phone rang.

I reached for it. "James McGarry Detective Service. McGarry speaking."

No response.

I began again. "McGarry Detective Service. McGarry—"

From the other end of the wire came a harsh, "Shut off that record! This is Franklin, Guardian Indemnity. You working on anything?"

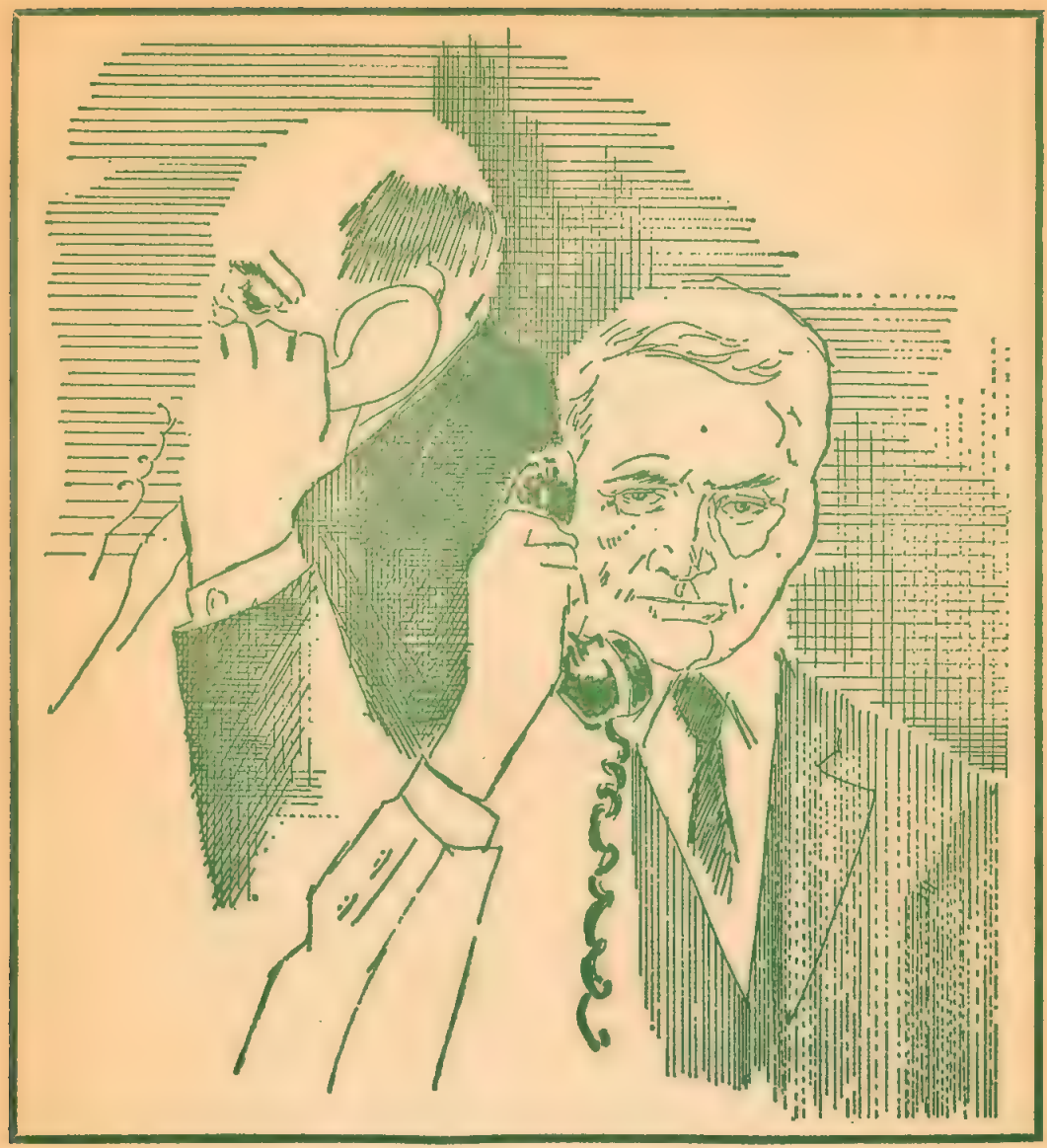
"Nothing that can't wait."

"You want to go out of town for a few days?"

"How far out?

"What difference does it make? Now, get this and get it the first time. A couple of guys tip over the Coulee Center State Bank, at nine-fifteen this morning. Coulee Center is a jerk boom town out on the desert in eastern Washington. There hasn't been a complete audit as yet, but the reported take exceeds forty-two thousand and Guardian is in there for the full load.

"I want you to get over there



and get to clawing before the deal gets too messed up. Hanson is out of town, so you'll have to work it solo at first. I've got a plane waiting for you at Boeing Field, with letters of introduction to the bank president and to the sheriff. Now get on over there before the bit gets blown."

"I'll be at the airport in ten minutes. You going to work this end?"

"Yeah, and I'll put Mench on the stoolies here. Call me as soon as you've got the rumbles and talked to the sheriff."

Eight minutes later, I was stepping into a Cessna cabin job that

was waiting with the prop turning. We taxied out onto the strip and took off. No time lost here.

An hour later and we were sitting down on the Coulee Center airport. I put the hustle on the local field pilot to drive me into town. "Hell!" he said, "I do more taxi driving around here than I do flying!"

Nevertheless, he took three singles and a swallow of Wild Turkey that I shoved at him and we were off and gone. About the time I decided that I had made a slight mistake, the Bonneville came to a sliding stop in front of the Desert Hotel.

The bell captain grabbed my bag. I guess he was captain; he got there first. I flipped a silver dollar at him.

"Ha," he said, "a big time shamus. A tin can heist we have here and local law can't draw breath before you guys are in."

"Yeah. Twenty-four hours and I'll wrap it up," I said.

"One of the best, he says. These rocking chair boys are going to love you. Let me know where to mail your throat."

"Clerk, get this guy off my back. And by the way, where do you find the bank around here?"

"The bank, he says," the bellhop cracked. "Well, you can ask that again. A couple of characters take off over the hill with it two hours ago. We ain't seen it since."

"Pal, with your talent, you ought to go to Hollywood. The walk would do you good."

The Coulee Center State Bank was three doors down the street. I entered and handed my letter of introduction to Leroy Bachus, the president, a harassed looking individual of perhaps forty-five. He wasn't much impressed.

"The sheriff and his deputies have been here," he said, "and so has the marshal. I have had a terrifying experience and I have been subjected to much needless, repetitious questioning. I am quite certain that the local law officers will gladly furnish you with all of the information that you will require, as well as the depositions of the witnesses."

After that mouthful, I said, "I can understand your reluctance to talk at this time, Mr. Bachus, but after all, Guardian Indemnity stands to lose forty-two grand on this caper and we do expect your fullest co-operation and assistance. You know, we aren't going to take this lying down."

President Bachus waved his hand at me. "Please don't misunderstand me. I assure you that I do wish to render all possible assistance. However, I have been subjected to a terrible ordeal and my nerves are on the ragged edge. I would appreciate your making this interview as brief as possible. Two auditors from Spokane are checking the vault and I must rejoin them."

"I'll do this as fast as I can. To begin with, tell me of your movements from the time you entered the bank this morning, up to and including the heist."

"Very well," Mr. Bachus replied. "I arrived at the bank at nine. At nine-five, the express company driver delivered the forty-two thousand dollar Basin payroll shipment to the vault and I signed a receipt for the same."

"I did not relock the bank doors, as two customers with whom I had an appointment to discuss the retiring of a loan were due to arrive within the next few minutes.

"At nine-ten, the two customers, Mr. Frye and Mr. Coulton, entered the bank. I seated them in the lobby office, then went to the vault to secure their file.

"Approximately five minutes later, while the three of us were in conference, I heard the front door of the bank open. I glanced toward it and I am afraid that I uttered a grasp of astonishment.

"Two men had entered the bank. They were roughly dressed and each held a large automatic pistol in his hand. Pieces of adhesive tape had been affixed to their faces, distorting their features in a manner quite horrible to behold. Mr. Frye and Mr. Coulton turned at my cry and we all stared at the gunmen, one of whom now advanced across the lobby and leaped over the office rail, behind which we were seated. The other gunman remained at the door with his pistol levelled at us. And—"

I interrupted him. "You made no attempt to use the outside alarm system?"

"No. The alarm installation is limited to the vault and the teller cages."

"Okay," I said, "go on."

"The gunman looked at me and said, 'You run this can?' I replied that I was president of the bank. The bandit then told Mr. Frye and Mr. Coulton to lie face down on the floor. I was ordered into the vault.

"The padlocked canvas sack, containing the Basin payroll cash, was lying on the vault floor. The bandit instructed me to remove the padlock from the sack, and of course I did that.

"He examined the bills for half a minute, then snapped the padlock onto the sack again. He demanded the padlock keys and I turned them over to him.

"He then ordered me back into the lobby office where he shoved me down onto the floor. He then bound my hands and also Mr. Frye's and Mr. Coulton's hands with black electric tape.

"Taking three bandana handkerchiefs from his pockets, he gagged all of us. The taller of the bandits then picked up the payroll sack and they both left the bank by the front door, snapping the self locking device. Half an hour later,

we were released by Charles Arnold, one of my tellers."

"Had you ever before seen either of the gunmen?" I asked.

"Not to my knowledge. The distortion of their features by the use of tape precluded any possibility of recognition."

"Describe them as closely as you can."

"Both, I would say, were about six feet in height and would weigh in the neighborhood of one hundred and eighty pounds. They were dark and they appeared to be about thirty years of age. They were wearing levis, blue denim jackets and striped railroad caps and high-heel riding boots."

"Would you figure them for locals?"

"They appeared to be desert men."

"No money, other than the payroll shipment was taken?"

"That I can't say for certain until the audit is complete. I went out before the gunman. It is quite possible that he did pick up other packets of bills."

"Well, I guess that will be all for now. Call me at the hotel when you complete the audit."

At the county jail, three blocks up the street, I presented my credentials to the sheriff.

After reading the letter and looking over my license and gun permit, the sheriff said, "Well, son, it didn't take you long to get over here. I may as well tell you, though, private eyes ain't so popular around these parts. We been here a long time and we aim to run our business in our own way. We don't take lightly to interference by strangers. If you figure to work here, just remember that. You probably wouldn't look too good in feathers."

"I'm easy to get along with," I said.

"Yes, I guess maybe you are at that," the sheriff agreed. "But I don't want nobody to push no muscle at me. You want to talk to the witnesses?"

"Yeah, I do."

The two witnesses, Frye and Coulton, told substantially the same stories as the bank president. They appeared to be reliable local business men, who seemed somewhat embarrassed by the position in which they had been placed, especially Coulton, who had been wearing a .38 shoulder gun at the time of the heist.

I turned back to the sheriff. "What's been happening on this end?" I asked him.

"Well, most of the posse came back here, when the bandits changed from car to horses and swum the Columbia River," the sheriff replied. "My chief deputy, who was in charge of the posse, is here now. You can talk to him."

A husky young deputy stepped forth from the crowd in the office.

"When did you first hear of the heist?" I asked him.

"At about nine-forty five," the deputy replied. "The alarm outside the bank began to bang out and I ran down there. There were half a dozen people in the bank office and the teller, Arnold, was cutting tape off of Mr. Bachus and the other two men, who were lying on the floor. When Mr. Bachus was able to speak, he said that two gunmen had held up the bank and taken the Basin payroll money.

"I called the sheriff right away and we did some fast checking. Two men, who we figured to be the bandits, had been seen leaving the bank about twenty minutes earlier. They had gotten into a '57 Chev coach and had headed west on the Black Butte road that leads to the river.

"A posse of a half a dozen cars was formed in a couple of minutes and we took out after them. We were about fifteen miles west of town, when we first spotted them. The desert begins to slope toward the river at that point and we could make out their dust. They were about six miles ahead of us then and we began really pouring on the coal.

"By the time we passed Black Butte we were gaining on them fast. They seemed to have blown a left front tire and were running on the rim, but they were still batting along. We were doing about seventy, which was pretty good for that road and we kept moving up on them. We weren't particularly

worried about them getting away, because the road pinches out at the river and we figured that we had them bottled up.

"When they plowed through the sand in the last draw, we were only a mile behind them. Then they got stalled in the drift sand and they left their car and ran for it.

"When we got up to their car, we were feeling pretty good. We had them trapped and it was all over but the shooting. We checked our guns and moved around the bend in the draw, coming in low and expecting gun fire any second. We came out into the open, took one look and got a hell of a shock.

"The heisters were on horses now and were tearing down he slope to the river, about a half mile away. They must have had the horses cached at the end of the draw.

"We fired, but couldn't get any kind of range on them. They kept right on going down to the river and we slugged along after them through the sand.

"The river is fast and deep at

that point, during this time of year and is loaded with drift ice, but the heisters went right into it on their horses and were swept downstream at a terrific rate.

"When we arrived at the river, the heisters were too far away for any effective shooting. They finally landed on a sand bar, more than a half mile downstream on the opposite shore.

"We were caught flatfooted. All we could do was watch while the heisters, on their horses, picked their way up the shelving hill. A few of the boys with long range rifles kept on firing, but didn't have any luck. When the heisters reached the top of the first long hump, which breaks into the mountains, we lost sight of them.

"Some of the boys drove back around Ellensburg to charter a plane and start an air search and the rest of us came back here. And that was it. As I see it, the heist was well planned and seemed to hinge on getting across the river after the switch from the car to horses. If the rest of their deal is as smooth as the first, we can perhaps kiss them off."

"Kiss them off!" I yelled. "What the hell is this, some kind of a jack-off defeatist meeting? I asked you for a statement, not an opinion. I'll form my own opinions. You sure loused up the situation!"

"I don't see what else we could have done," the deputy said.

"What else you could have done?" I exploded, "What the hell did you do?"

"Well, we did all we could. Maybe you should have been with us?"

"Yeah, maybe I should. I wonder why I didn't think of that last night in Seattle. All right, now: let's get started on this thing again and with something constructive. Did you get any kind of a look at the heisters?"

"I got a pretty good look at them through glasses," the deputy replied. "They were both big guys. They were wearing levis and railroad peak caps. They had pieces of tape across their faces and I couldn't tell anything about their features."

"Do you figure them for local talent?"

"That I couldn't say. The country is full of strangers since the Basin project got under way and everybody here wears more or less the same kind of clothes."

"Why the hell didn't you go into the river, when you had them in your lap? You get paid on this job, don't you?"

"Yeah, I get paid. But not for swimming no rivers in mid-winter."

"I'll bet you guys look real great, working over beer saloon drunks. But when it comes to facing a couple of tough gunmen and some cold water, that they've got guts enough to go into, you chicken out. You and your foxy grandpa sheriff here, talking to me

about being tough and pushing muscle. I know some fifteen-year-old Yesler Hill hoods, who could fade you guys with a twenty-two Woodsman. Rough and tough! All right, what about the heist car? You trip up on that, too?"

"The car was stolen from a rancher twenty miles east of town. It was reported three days ago."

"Did you check on the horses?"

"They were bought from a trader and staked out in the draw with feed and water, two days ago."

"What other checking have you done?"

"That's all. There weren't any fingerprints or anything else in the car."

"Fingerprints! You wouldn't know a fingerprint if you had a hatful! You've had this case all to yourself since nine-forty five this morning. And what have you accomplished? You let the heisters make a clean getaway, right out of the country, on the grounds that the water was cold and that they had guns.

"You suspect that the car was stolen and that the horses were bought. And that car was undoubtedly loaded with prints. So what? You leave the car at the river, because a tire had rolled off it. And since, perhaps fifty guys have climbed in and out of it. So that's gone.

"Where is the horse trader, the only witness who actually saw the heisters with the tape off their faces? He's probably in Idaho by now. Maybe you don't know it, but this caper wasn't blueprinted this morning or yesterday morning or last week. It's been cased and rehearsed for a month.

"Pictures have been taken and every move has been worked out. And somebody saw those guys. In a town of this size, strangers are noticed and can be checked on, so for God's sake, let's get on the ball. Everybody connected with this case, no matter how remotely, should be checked and double checked. I don't want to have to do all of the work, but the way you guys are fumbling, I'll probably have to.

"Forty-two jeesters, my friend, is nothing to speak of lightly. I've known city cops who have gone down blasting, trying to bring in two dollar muggers. Maybe if you apple knockers ever tried to accumulate forty two g's in a fairly honest manner, you might get a closer insight into enforcement responsibility.

"However, you can still do some constructive work on this case if you'll get off your prats, divide your force into groups and work from the point of beginning. That means start from scratch and that's where we're all going to start from."

Nobody said a word and I turned and walked out of the office. I could see what the sheriff had meant about not liking private eyes.

The chief deputy followed me out of the door, asked me if I wanted to join him in the hunt in a plane that was coming in from Yakima.

"No," I said, "I'll work this end and see what develops."

I went to my suite in the hotel, had two glasses of brandy, then stretched out on the bed and thought the deal over for an hour. I must have eventually fallen asleep, as it was three when I again opened my eyes. A hell of a way to do detecting.

In the hotel dining room, I had an antapasto salad, a beautiful porterhouse steak, baked potato, oven warmed french bread spread with garlic butter and a bottle of burgundy.

Following this break, I returned to my room. I phoned the sheriff's office. There had been no new developments. Both planes had returned from a futile three hour search of the desert and mountains on the west side of the river.

Neither bandits or horses had been spotted. A ground party had found an empty canvas money sack on the sandbar, where, the heisters had come up out of the river. That was all.

"Did the money sack have a padlock on it?" I asked the sheriff.

"It did," the sheriff replied.

"Was it locked?"

"It was."

I phoned Ned Franklin, manager of Guardian Indemnity, in Seattle, gave him a summary of the case. I asked if operative Mench had picked up anything from Seattle or Tacoma stoolies.

"Not a thing," he said. I asked him a couple of other questions, then hung up.

I then called several North Basin project camps, talked to the timekeepers. This took half an hour.

Following this, I got the young chief deputy in the sheriff's office on the line, asked him to come over to the hotel. He said that he would be right over. When he arrived, we had a couple of drinks and then I outlined a little stakeout proposition to him.

It was ten o'clock, black and blowing a gale, when the chief deputy and I drove out to the elite residential section of Coulee Center, parked on the east side of Palm Avenue. We slid deep into the cushions of the deputy's Ford coach, ducking completely out of sight each time car lights approached.

One hour passed, then another. The wind blew and the leaves and tumbleweeds raced each other down the street. House lights went out, one after the other. The town was folding up for the night.

Another hour. Only one house now showed any light, that on a knoll at the end of the street. The leaves, dust and tumbleweeds continued to fly by and there were also a few drops of rain.

Then the lights of a car cut in around the corner behind us. Brak-

ing down, it moved slowly on up the street, went by us while we were ducked low in the cushions.

It was an Oldsmobile convertible. The car continued on up the street to the intersection, then turned and came back and parked on the right hand side some fifty feet to the south of us. I could make out two men in the front seat.

After a couple of minutes wait, one of the men got out of the Olds. He walked back up the street, turned into the large lighted house on the knoll.

I nodded to Christy, the deputy. "This is it." I said.

"Yeah," Christy half whispered. "Just like that! You pound your ear in the hotel, while I race over half the state. Now this is it and they come right to you. You weren't lying when you said that you've got something that we ain't. I only wish, though, that you had been there to swim that river. What a hell of a lot of trouble that would have saved."

"Yeah, no talent but a lot of class."

We slipped out of the car on the curb side, crossed the unlighted street, then moved stealthily down the parking strip, until we were at the rear of the Olds. We crouched in the grass in the howling gale, got out our guns. I went in fast then, jerked open the Old's left front door, jammed my gun into the belly of the very surprised guy at the wheel.

"Get your hands up and don't make a sound!" I hissed.

The guy, open-mouthed with astonishment, got his hands up. At that instant, Christy rapped him over the eyes with his big sap. The guy slumped back onto the seat, with arms outspread. I slipped a cuff around his left wrist, snapped the other around the steering post. I then patted him over, took a belly gun, a .38, from under his belt.

Christy rapped the guy once again with his sap and he slid off the seat onto the floor, his manacled left arm grotesquely outstretched. I thought: This desert law can be a little rough at that.

Outside, I lifted the hood of the car, jerked out the horn wire. Christy and I then went up the street on the double to the big lighted house where the other occupant of the Olds had turned in.

Downstairs lights were on in what was apparently the library. The venetian blinds were slightly apart and Christy and I took a close up gander.

A well dressed character of about six feet, one hundred and eighty pounds, was seated in a large leather chair and standing before him was Leroy Bachus, the bank president, opening a bottle.

Putting a foot on Christy's hands, I stepped up onto the window sill. The big guy moved over to the bar. His back was to me now and that was the way I wanted it.

I hit the window cross bar with a hard body smash. The cross bar, glass, venetian blind and I, landed in the room with a crash. I had my gun in my hand.

The big guy and the banker leaped back from the bar, their faces blanks of astonishment. I held my gun on them while deputy Christy came through the window. Christy used his sap on the big guy, belting him above the ear. He went down in a heap. Christy then moved toward the banker, who immediately began to back up and scream.

"Don't hit me! Don't hit me!" he cried out. He dropped to his knees. "Please don't hit me!" he pleaded. "Please don't!" Leroy Bachus bent forward until he was almost prostrate.

"Get up, you bastard!" I growled at him, kicking him on the side of his chest.

In a single, surprising motion, Bachus swung up from the floor. He had a gun in his hand. I saw it a split second before he squeezed the trigger. I must have hit the floor the same time that the gun started spitting death. Two slugs went tearing through the shoulder of my coat, one nicking the flesh over my collar bone.

The next instant, I pulled through on my .38 special. The slug smacked the banker in the left shoulder, jerked him around and dropped him onto the rug, with his gun spinning across the hardwood floor. .38 specials do have stopping ability.

A minute and a half later, the big guy sat up, began staring popeyed at the shiny, crimson blood soaking up the back of Bachus' white shirt, as he lay face down on the floor.

Bachus's wife and maid came screaming into the library. Christy flashed his buzzer and told them to hustle back upstairs.

"Is my husband dead?" the wife cried out.

"No," Christy replied, "he's only nicked. You can call your doctor and he can fix him up before we take him away."

She almost screamed again. "Take him away? What has he done? What has he done?"

Christy cut her off with, "He's done plenty. We'll talk about it later. Now, get the hell out of here."

The wife left sobbing with her maid's arm about her.

Bachus rolled over, struggled slowly up to a sitting position on the rug. He touched his shoulder tentatively, then stared at the blood on his fingers, as if he couldn't believe it possible.

I took a pint of Wild Turkey from my pocket, handed it to him. He took a pull from it, then the big guy took it from him.

Christy now brought the other guy in from the Olds. He looked like he had been roughed up some more. I told him to sit on the floor with the other two, gave him a

swallow from the remainder of the Wild Turkey, as his hands were now cuffed behind him.

Bachus, who had slumped back against the mahogany panelled wall, was glaring bitterly at me. His face was the color of putty and was wet with perspiration.

Christy rang for the maid, had her bring a roll of cotton, gauze, tape and alcohol. I cleaned up my shoulder, taped on some gauze, put my shirt back on. I then turned to the trio.

"All right, you guys," I said, "we are now going to have a little talk. This is going to be a very informal talk, with a few questions. If the answers I get don't fit the questions, Christy here, is going to belt you bums on your noggins with that sap of his, until we do get the right answers. And don't ever let anyone tell you that he can't belt."

Christy handed me the pint and I took a long pull from it. I then turned to Bachus.

"I'm going to start with you, Mister President," I said, "and this should be the wrap up of your small venture into criminal conspiracy. You did pretty well at that; you almost cut it. If you could have gotten over this one rough spot, you might have made it.

"At first glance, this heist looked like the real McCoy. But after I got to messing around with it, it seemed a little too pat and I got a slight inside smell. Not much, but enough. I checked through the idemnity company in Seattle and they informed me that three months ago, you had sold your bank here to a chain banking corporation and that this was to be your last week of possession.

"You undoubtedly figured this heist out some time ago and must have felt reasonably certain that you'd worked all of the bugs out of it. You almost had at that.

"If it had been successful, it would have added Forty Two Jeesters to the seventy five that you were getting from the bank sale. A nice touch with a minimum of risk.

"You approached these two chumps with the phony heist proposition and the promise of a big cut and they went overboard for it. It was a sucker's play. Taking candy from a kid.

"There are certain risks, however, that have to be faced up in every heist, even a phony. The toughest are setup timing, law, accidents and getaway. But you had all the breaks. Your timing was perfect. Top law here is admittedly of not very high caliber, you had no major accidents and the river was your final ace in the hole in the getaway.

"You dressed the stage well, with your two invited witnesses. From there on in the deal moved like clock work. The taped faces gave a nice added touch. When the heister went back into the vault, with you, you handed him an empty payroll sack with a padlock on

it. The forty-two grand that the sack had originally contained had been removed by you and transferred to a safer hiding place, possibly to that panel wall box that you've got here. You weren't going to let that geetus get out of your sight. Oh, no, not you.

"If there were any slipups, you were going to be still holding the bundle. You sure as hell must have given these misguided heisters a lot of con argument, to get them to agree to lift an empty sack and then to return here for their cuts. What a pair of chumps!

"The first real tipoff was the picking up of the locked money sack on the sand bar. Guys in a hurry don't replace padlocks on empty sacks. The sack probably slipped away while they were swimming the river.

"Big construction camps, like these in the Columbia Basin, are overrun with guys who are ready and willing to take a whirl at any sort of a caper that will bring them some fairly heavy loot. I figured that you had quite possibly enlisted help from one of these camps, so I just dogged your footsteps.

"From a North Basin timekeeper, I learned that two big guys had been absent from work six days, including today, in these past two weeks and that one of them owned an Olds convertible. Taking it for granted that you still held the plunder, I concluded that the heisters wouldn't wait too long to move in and claim their cuts. They probably weren't overly trusting.

"I guessed too, that you might also have had some plans for the heisters when they appeared—something like killing."

"Two facts indicate this. First, you had them come in here one at a time. Second, that bottle of whiskey that you were opening when I came through the window, had been loaded with cyanide. I got a slight whiff of the bitter almonds when the bottle went over."

The heisters now swung about and glared at Bachus.

"Why, you bastard!" the taller of the manacled pair roared out.

"All right, you guys," I said. "Now get this, because I'm going to give it to you straight. I've got you chumps right in my pocket and from here on in the picture ain't bright. I'm going to give you two choices, but they both wind up with the same answer.

"You can sign a statement here and now and then cop a plea or you can go on down to the county bucket and get your brains knocked out and then sign. It's going to be one or the other, so make up your minds."

The two gunsels mumbled to each other.

"We'll cop a plea," the taller of the pair finally said, "but we ain't going to take this rap alone."

"Oh, yes you are," I said. "Your sponsor here just sneaked a drink out of his own bottle."

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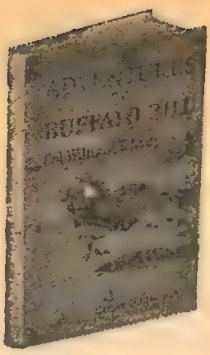

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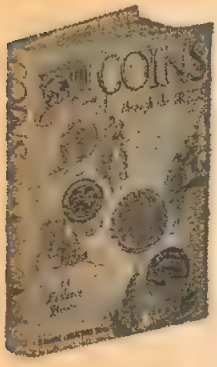

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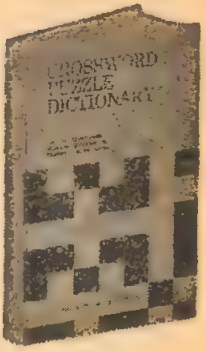

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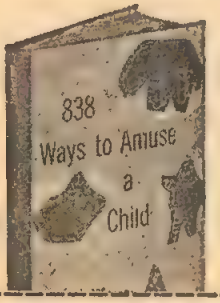

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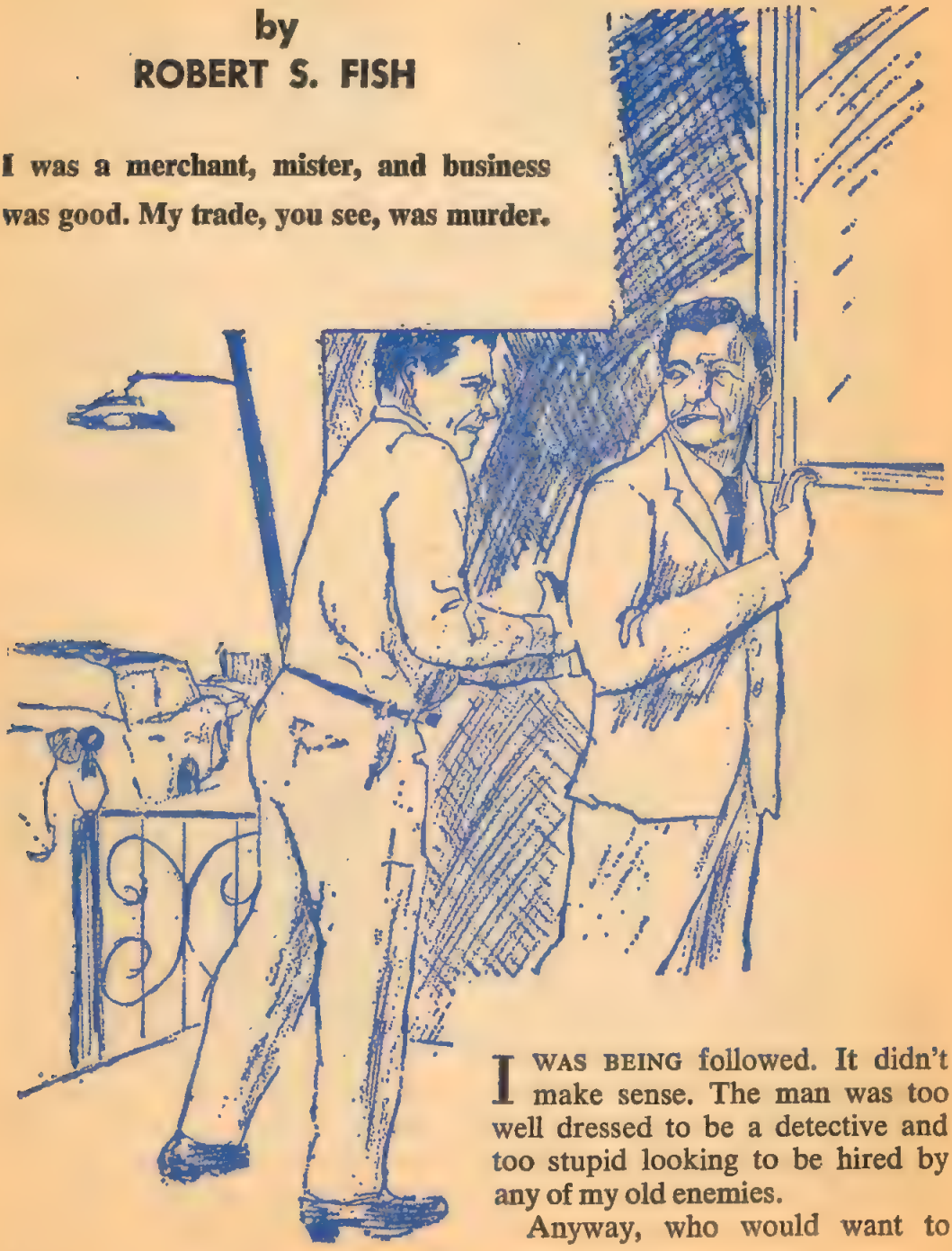
THE CHINESE SHELL GAME

by
ROBERT S. FISH

I was a merchant, mister, and business was good. My trade, you see, was murder.



I WAS BEING followed. It didn't make sense. The man was too well dressed to be a detective and too stupid looking to be hired by any of my old enemies.

Anyway, who would want to

follow a panhandler in dirty clothes with a four-day beard? It didn't make sense.

Casually, I pocketed my last solicited quarter as I turned the corner of 18th street. I ducked into the first doorway I came to and slipped the safety off my pistol. Shivering from the cold, I waited.

If my shadow was as dumb as he looked, he'd walk by with his mouth open and his eyes shut.

He did.

I grabbed him by his collar and yanked him backwards into the doorway, my gun in the small of his back.

"Don't move, punk," I hissed. "What do you want?" I had to hand it to him, he didn't even blink.

"Mr. Mark Harris?" he asked in a cocktail party tone.

I shooked him. "What do you want?"

He turned his head and smiled, cold and phony.

"Please come with me. Someone I know wishes to employ you."

Suspicious, I frowned. He started to reach for his pocket.

"Easy," I told him, tightening my hold on his collar.

He put his hand into his pocket slowly and came out with a roll of bills. Opening the roll, he flipped through it. All twenties. About five hundred dollars, I guessed. He held it out to me.

"Will you come with me, please? This is a down payment."

I released him and took the money. Hell, I was broke. October in New York is no fun when you're cold. I hadn't seen or felt the sun in a week, only gray clouds and cold dirty winds. He hailed a cab.

Uptown, we went into an apartment house, complete with doorman and fountains in the lobby. I remembered with sadness when I had lived in such luxury. It wasn't so long ago.

At the eighteenth floor, we entered an apartment—nicely furnished, predominantly Oriental but not distinctive.

In the living room, three men sat on a long couch. One of them was Chinese. The other two were Americans, thin, pale, wearing expensive, stylish suits, as was the Chinese. I was still cold so I kept my coat on.

Nonchalantly I looked for a comfortable chair the three on the couch just stared at me. My escort pointed to a chair in front of the three. I took one off to the side.

The escort backed into a far corner of the room, behind me. I had a feeling that he was armed too.

The silence was beginning to make me tense. I blew my nose on my gray, dirty handkerchief.

The man sitting in the middle leaned forward to look at me.

"Mr. Harris," he said, "for your services we are willing to pay you twenty thousand dollars."

My stomach tightened. I had

only one ability worth that much—murder.

Carefully I crossed my legs.

"It must be somebody important," I said.

"Yes, that's right. Would you like some coffee?"

While my feet and hands thawed out and my nose ran, I was told about myself and the murder. The man in the middle did all the talking.

They knew I had been a top gunman with the big syndicate in New York a few years ago. When the Justice Department had finally broken it, I was lily-white because I had played it smart.

I could have worked for any gang in the country after that; I was good and the cops couldn't touch me.

But most of the mobs were cheap little double-crossing outfits. I have to work on the up-and-up or I don't work. If you can't trust your own gang, with no lying between you, you'll get yours sooner or later.

Trying so hard to stay clean, I had hit the bottom and I hadn't bounced.

At forty-six, I was on my way out for good, one of the last of the really big guns.

My hosts were giving me a chance to come back on top, to become an "historical figure," as they put it.

"You know, Mr. Harris, the People's Republic of China was just admitted to the United Nations last month."

I knew. It had made big enough headlines. The U.S. and a few other countries had kicked but Red China had made it anyway: it had become too big a nuclear power to ignore.

Next March, Red China's foreign minister, Chang Lin, would be coming to New York for the emergency session that would be held over the fighting in India.

I tilted my head to the side. "What fighting in India?" I asked. Hard, piercing eyes and the same phony smile met me.

"Believe me, Mr. Harris, there will be fighting in India by March." I shrugged and wished I could take off my shoes and rub my feet. They were beginning to warm up and they ached.

On March 28th this hot shot Chinese would give a speech in the U.N. General Assembly. My job would be to assassinate him as he went to a private luncheon following the speech.

Red China would yell "Foul" and use this as an excuse to invade India.

"I don't see the connection."

"It will all be clear as history reveals itself, Mr. Harris," he said in a condescending voice which was very annoying.

Confused, I shifted in my chair and began to chew on a matchstick extracted from my worn jacket pocket. Not a very satisfying sub-

stitute for cigarettes, but my gun hand was steady.

"Why pick me?" I asked. The smoothie with the ear flaps put his white hands together gently as though he were about to pray.

"We wanted an American, naturally. And one with a background in crime, but with no connection to Communism. And an awfully good shot." The soft-looking hands dipped, fingertips still touching. "There are other prerequisites which we will arrange."

"And what happens to me?" I asked with a sarcastic smile. The hands opened, palms up.

"You will be given asylum in a foreign country."

I tapped the matchstick against my front teeth. "If I say no?"

"We will find someone else and your new knowledge will die with you—soon." I smiled again and shifted gears.

"Is it worth it, sacrificing one of your top men"

He hesitated, but his smile never cracked.

"I must admit," he said slowly, "this plan does not have the backing of our leaders. They are unaware of it." Smoothie looked at his two friends before continuing.

"We are a small but influential faction. The proper precautions shall be taken."

This went over my head, so I didn't say anything. All three men looked at me in silence. I stared at my knuckles, noticing the dry skin split from exposure to the cold. Finally I took a deep breath.

"Something tells me I'll be your —guest from now until March," I said.

"That is correct." It appeared that I didn't have a lot of choice: shoot or get shot. But that didn't mean I'd work for peanuts.

"Look," I said, "I'm going to become a public enemy and an alien to America. I'll probably die lonely as hell in my old age. I want three hundred thousand."

The hands fluttered. "Impossible." The heat in the room was making me drowsy.

"Then kill me," I muttered. I figured I looked in bad enough shape to make the bluff work.

"Mr. Harris, we could force you to do this without paying you anything," my host said in a hurt tone.

"Yes, but you couldn't trust me. If you want this done perfectly, you have to pay for it."

"Fifty thousand," he said. I laughed.

Smoothie looked at the Chinese fellow, who must have been the treasurer, because he nodded.

"One hundred thousand," Smoothie said.

We finally met at two hundred thousand, fifty now and the rest when I was in my new "home—" probably Brazil, they hinted.

"The first thing I want," I said, standing up, "is some warm socks."

I was hoping they'd take me to Miami or Phoenix, but I went

North instead to a large estate in the Catskills.

They did give me some heavy clothes. I shaved and got a haircut and some of my rugged handsomeness of old came back into the mirror. A little more gray at the temples too, unfortunately.

The days were long and damp and cold. Muttering ancient injunctions against icy spirits, I bundled up every day and went out into the morbid grayness to practice with my rifle.

I was told I had to use an American military rifle, so I chose the M-14 and fitted it out with a telescopic sight.

My target was set at the same distance and angle that I would have in New York. By January I had gotten my old eye back again. I was popping off the targets just like the old days. It made me feel good. Mark Harris wasn't over the hill yet.

Hug Ho, or some name like that, an American Chinese dedicated to world domination by Mother Communism, was my constant companion. He dressed like a college student and was short and —well, Chinese-looking.

The bulk of our conversations usually followed a pattern:

"Let's go in, Hug Ho. I've had enough target practice today."

"Shoot more."

"Damn it, it's snowing. No human being can survive in this weather." I hopped around, looking, I hoped, pathetic. "My fingers and toes are frostbitten already."

"Shoot more."

Tight-lipped, I would blast away until my nostrils burned with the hot smell of gunpowder.

Only the food and warm clothing made the winter bearable. Most of the time Hug Ho and I had to dig our way through the snow to get to my rifle range. Fun.

Whenever our usually stimulating conversation about the weather lagged, I pumped Hug Ho for more information about the assassination. One thing he did reveal irritated me.

I wouldn't be shooting the foreign minister but a stand-in, a double being groomed in Red China. The "small but influential faction" had talked the real Chang Lin into sending a double!

They had warned him of the dangers of assassination. The fac-

tion would not be suspected of the murder, but would be rewarded for its foresight and advice.

The faction would then recommend that the double not be exposed. That way, China would have its martyr while keeping his valuable services, though behind the scenes.

Chang's name would become a symbol of sacrifice, of honor, a rallying cry for the Chinese to fight and die for as they invaded India.

The old shell game, I thought. Just a big, phony put-on from every angle.

At times Hug Ho showed me newspapers where my name was mentioned. Certain columnists implied that Mark Harris was active again, this time with political backing. After the murder, I would probably be labeled a pawn of the F.B.I. or something. The stage was really being set.

In March, the snow started to melt. I still had a cold but I was looking forward hungrily to a warm, green spring. Then it was time to go to New York.

Hug Ho and I were driven to an apartment in a housing development on the East River. I could see the United Nations buildings from the living room window. Very dramatic, I thought.

The apartment was gaudy and repelling in its furnishings—purples and saffron ran wild over the walls and rugs.

"This must be your place, Hug," I said, wrinkling my nose. Hug Ho smiled.

"No, it belongs to a friend of yours, Benny Abramson." I twirled a matchstick between my lips. Blind Benny, the rackets king.

"Where's old Benny now?" I asked.

"Vacationing in Florida. We borrowed his apartment. He'll know about it soon enough."

So they were wrapping Benny up in the web with me. Benny was a crude link but he'd do.

"Get some rest," Hug Ho suggested. "Tomorrow is the twenty-eighth."

I slept badly that night. Maybe my nerves weren't as good as they used to be. And it always takes me two or three nights to get used to a strange bed.

Hug Ho and another Red agent that had joined us took turns staying up and doing spy exercises or something. I had my own problems: the next day's events kept going through my mind.

At 9:30, Chang Lin would give his speech at the U.N. and promise to show documentary proof that America planned to invade China through India. At 11:45, his entourage would arrive in the street below for the luncheon.

As he entered the apartment building opposite me, I'd let him have it. Leaving my rifle with all my fingerprints on it, my two guards and I would run out the back to a waiting car. With the

split-second timing of a bad movie, we were supposed to make some connections to get me out of the country.

I had worn a pair of socks to bed but my feet were still cold. I got up at six, puffy-eyed, and cleaned my rifle.

After a coffee breakfast, I worked around and found my best position at the window. We were on the second floor and my target would be no more than seventy-five yards away.

It was a slate gray cold morning, dreary and depressing. Tense, I checked my M-14 again. It was set for fully automatic, though I'd only have time for one shot. I chewed up matchsticks like they were candy. It was 9:30.

Every ten minutes I'd get a cup of coffee and then have to go to the bathroom.

We turned on the radio. By 10:30 the newscasters were recounting phony Chang's phony speech. The plan was running smoothly.

At 11:30 I put my head under the cold water faucet. It calmed me a little. Licking beads of water off my lips, I took my place at the window, caressing the stock of my rifle.

Hug Ho and his friend stood behind me, one on either side. Everything was ready.

"Mark." I turned to look at Hug Ho.

"If you miss," he said, "you will die quickly." His hand was in his pocket.

Damn clever, these Chinese, I thought, and turned back to the window.

My mouth was producing saliva faster than I could swallow it. Hell, at my age I shouldn't be doing this. I could get a heart attack.

Just as I was about to go to the bathroom again, a caravan of black cars pulled into the service drive. My hands turned to ice. Hug Ho leaned over me and opened the window.

An icy wind hit me in the face and cut through me, coat and all. Winter was coming back again with a vengeance.

I blinked and raised my rifle.

Chang Lin, or his double, got out of the Cadillac. I recognized his pumpkin head and fringe of black hair from the pictures I had studied. The heavy gray overcoat and baggy pants made him look like a fat panda. I chuckled nervously.

"Get busy," Hug Ho barked. His voice was cold, almost as cold as the wind. My mouth began to twitch.

Squinting, I lined up Chang in the cross hairs. His back was to me as he climbed the five steps to the apartment entrance. On the fourth step he paused and turned around. He was smiling and I could see his dark eyes clearly. Probably thinking what a bang-up job he was doing with his imitation, I imagined.

I blinked again. My heart was

thudding loudly. *Go on, get the damn thing over.*

Slowly, I squeezed the trigger.

The stock dug into my shoulder and I saw a puff of dust rise as the bullet struck the concrete pavement just beyond Chang's head. I had missed.

In an instant the police were swarming all over Chang. Another shot was impossible.

I heard two breaths being sucked in together behind me. Jumping up from my crouched position, I swung the rifle butt up and back to where I thought Hung Ho's face was.

I was right—the butt caught him across the nose.

I turned with my follow through and fired a shot point blank at Hug Ho's buddy. He grabbed at his stomach and collapsed.

Fascinated, I watched him. It had been years—the result was still appalling.

Then I heard people yelling outside. Quivering with cold and disgust, I backed quickly to the door as Hug Ho shook the blood out of his eyes and reached toward his pocket. I only had time to squeeze off a movie-hero shot from the hip. My stomach lurched as blood appeared on the yellow walls.

The icy fear that comes with murder took control. Still carrying the rifle, I ran down the stairs, jumping the steps three and four at a time.

Out of breath, I lunged into the

back seat of the car downstairs. A driver and my old friend Smoothie were in the front.

"Let's get outa here," I yelled, panting. Smoothie pulled a gun.

"Where are the other two? Why do you have the rifle?"

I was beginning to panic.

"Get out, come on," I said, pounding on the driver's shoulders. He hesitated, then shot out into the traffic of the East River Drive.

Soaked with biting cold sweat, I leaned back against the seat, breathing deeply.

"What happened back there?" Smoothie demanded. I looked up at him.

His eyes were cold and hard. And he wasn't smiling. His gun was pointing at me.

I wiped my hands on my coat. My feet were freezing.

"What difference does it make?" I rasped. "We've got to run, fast. Step on it."

I was afraid he was going to shoot me right then. And my rifle was on the floor.

I licked my lips. The driver was

pushing fifty and weaving in and out of the traffic.

Then I saw a cop's red globe on the roof of a car approaching us. My breath caught in my throat—this had to be timed right.

When the patrol car was a hundred feet away, I leaned forward in horror and pointed to it, my finger in the driver's face.

"Look, the police," I screamed. "Quick, turn here before they see us!"

The driver was becoming completely unnerved.

"Slow down; now go to the far right lane! Good!" I yelled, urging him with poundings on his back. The other mna watched me closely.

"Quick, turn up here; now, turn, turn!" The driver twisted the wheel, obeying.

As we rounded the concrete wall we met the oncoming traffic hurtling down from a viaduct.

The driver gasped as he looked into the grill of a two-ton delivery truck. Smoothie turned to see why all the horns were blowing.

As he did, I opened the door and rolled out, hoping to reach the concrete wall before the traffic passed over me.

I skidded on my shoulder and hip. There was no pain, even when I hit the wall, hard. Just as I blacked out, I heard the satisfying crunch of metal against metal over the horn blasts.

I got a broken arm and shoulder out of that. At my age, bones don't heal very easily.

I own a small store now. I can't tell you where, but it's not in the U.S.

After I had explained everything, nobody seemed to know what to do with me.

I wasn't safe from an assassin bent on revenge, and they didn't want to give me a medal or put me in jail.

The whole stupid plot fell through, of course. Somebody told me that Chang's double was shot as a conspirator when he got back to China. After he had been exposed at the U.N.

I might've killed him myself if those people hadn't been so damn sneaky and underhanded. They were pulling such a shell game that it made me sick.

That was why I felt no guilt about using the double-cross myself.

Why, I probably would have ended up in Siberia with my two hundred thousand. And no socks.

A NEW COMPLETE SOLO AND ILLYA NOVEL NEXT MONTH

EVERYBODY REMEMBERS WHATSISNAME

by LARRY MADDOCK

The man with a thousand faces knew that one of them would be his ruin. But—which one would betray him?

THE FACE OF Danny Mitchell was not a face to remember. It had neither the outstanding nose nor the shaggy eyebrows, noteworthy mouth or dimpled chin which set some men apart from their fellows. It was neither beautiful nor ugly; it could best be described as adequate.

Nature had also given Danny enough brains to realize the advantages of such a face, plus the talent to make it work for him. In high school he earned considerable applause by contorting his features into approximations of famous personalities. He duplicated not only the face and the voice but the posture, mannerisms, stance, walk and speech rhythms of the celebrities he mimicked.

Danny learned that to look fat

one must think fat, and vice versa. It was inevitable that his talents should carry him into show business.

Perhaps you caught his act during his night club days. He was the comic who did Laurel and Hardy so convincingly—both at the same time. His Bogart was excellent. His Cagney likewise. His impression of W. C. Fields was unsurpassed. His Sullivan even astonished Ed Sullivan. He used to close his act with an impression of Sammy Davis, Jr. doing impressions of everybody else.

That was Danny Mitchell, otherwise known as Whatsisname, the guy who does Laurel and Hardy. Outside of his two appearances on network TV, Danny's career was confined to night clubs.

Once he almost got booked into a big-time Las Vegas bistro but the club-owner forgot his name. It is said that Whatsisname shrugged and observed, "Well, that's show biz."

Sergeant Sheldon Sachs of the Manhattan division could not remember ever having seen Whatsisname in a night club. As Sergeant Sachs is noted for his amazing memory for faces, we are forced to take his word for it. Nor had he ever heard of Danny Mitchell.

To appreciate what Danny did it is necessary to follow the last days of his night club career, for that was when the die was cast. Don't relegate him too quickly to the forgotten limbo of yesterday's comics, for he was an artist.

Shortly before his downfall he began to experiment with a new dimension of acting. Among serious performers it's known as "observation" and is a base upon which convincing dramatic characterizations are built. Stanislavsky wrote about it, Lee Strasberg dabbled in it, Francis Lederer preached it—but it remained for Whatsisname to perfect it as an independent art form.

Danny was becoming bored with Fields, Cagney, Bogart, Davis—even the challenge of doing Laurel and Hardy began to pall, despite the personal note of appreciation Stan Laurel sent him after seeing him on TV. The act needed something new, Danny felt, something radically different.

He began by including an "unknown" among the celebrities—an impression of a man he'd seen trying to get a bottle out of a stubborn soft drink machine. It drew some applause, but nothing like the reaction to W. C. Fields, *et al.*

The next night he kept the balky machine bit and added his impression of an inept breakfast cook trying to keep track of six different egg orders and eight stacks of cakes. The reception again was luke-warm.

He spent the next week refining the eggs-and-hotcakes routine without any gains in his audience reaction. Still convinced that he

was on the right track, however, he added a Mexican ticket-taker he'd encountered at a movie theater and discovered that the only way he could get a decent response was to burlesque the man unmercifully.

The club-owner gruffly pointed out that Danny's act was running a bit long and suggested that he drop the stuff that was laying eggs and go back to the tried and true. Danny compromised by shortening the celebrity impersonations. He dropped the balky machine bit and substituted a bus driver trying to change a twenty while negotiating a busy intersection.

It drew a few titters but no boffola.

Desperately, Danny worked to perfect his new and artistically valid routines, while the club-owner glowered. Within a week he happened to witness an accident in which a truck ran over a little boy. The truck driver's reactions became material for a heart-breaking four minute bit in the show that night. The sudden change of pace drew a stunned silence. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

Although the bit was an artistic success it killed the rest of the act. The club-owner flatly forbade Whatsisname from repeating it.

"At least you had sense enough not to make it a drunk driver," he grunted.

Danny smiled wryly, knowing that the man's profits were tied to a steady flow of drink sales.

Undaunted, he continued perfecting his "common man" bits. His theory was that the common man becomes decidedly uncommon—and therefore interesting—once you figure out what makes him tick.

Unfortunately, his audiences didn't agree, and a week later Whatsisname was out of a job.

One club-owner's opinion didn't mean much to Danny Mitchell. He made the rounds, but word of his flop preceded him. The best bookings he could get were occasional one-night stands replacing the regular comics.

His agent pleaded with him to go back to the standard routines which had fed them both for so many seasons.

"No," Danny insisted. "I'm onto something great. Once I get all the kinks worked out, it'll make me a star. Nobody ever hit the big-time doing Laurel and Hardy except Laurel and Hardy."

Cowed by Danny's logic, the agent walked away in disgust.

The money had been coming in steadily for better than three years—twice what the average man makes at an average job. But Danny had spent it faster than he earned it. Those increasingly infrequent replacement bookings began to spell the difference between starvation and survival. Danny's agent dutifully deducted his com-

mission and then loaned it back to his destitute client.

Danny still refused to go back to the standard act. He worked harder than ever at impersonating strangers. Several times he walked into his agent's office "in character" and was totally unrecognized for several minutes, without resorting to make-up, costumes or the like. He used only stance, gestures, body rhythms and his amazingly plastic face to achieve the transformations.

"It's great, Danny," the agent admitted. "It's tremendous. But the clubs won't buy it. It's not what they're used to in the way of entertainment."

"They'll buy it sooner or later," Danny said. "You just keep trying to sell it to 'em." He tilted his hat forward and his body settled into a different attitude. The agent blinked, for he was now looking at a mirror image of himself.

"Meanwhile," this 'image' continued, "you wouldn't happen to have a five-spot lying around loose, would you?"

"Danny-baby," the agent laughed, reaching for his wallet, "I'd hate to try to give your description to the police."

Danny grinned, pocketing the five. "Just tell 'em to look for Whatsisname," he quipped. His face and body shifted again and Jimmy Durante strutted out of the office.

Economic need. An empty belly. Bitterness toward a society which had rejected him. A genius for mimicry, coupled with the ability to change his appearance almost instantaneously. A man who could walk into a crowd as Clark Gable and walk out, ten seconds later, as Jerry Lewis. Dangerously, a man who could walk into the same crowd as Joe Anybody and emerge as Bill Nobody. The common man bit, perverted for crime.

A rash of daring holdups hit the city, with witnesses completely unable to describe the bandits. Sometimes, several witnesses to one crime could not agree on what the criminal looked like. On one occasion, the bandit had run into a blind alley and totally disappeared.

Two policemen had seen him duck into the alley at a dead run, and had questioned a man who was coming out of the alley at the same time. He'd got a good look at the fugitive and gave a vivid description but the lead led nowhere. Later, the witness himself disappeared.

Liquor stores, gas stations and used car dealers were the initial victims, but soon drive-in movies, night clubs and cocktail lounges became prime targets. Police theorized an organized gang of small-time crooks masterminded by a criminal-minded Houdini. Tabloids dubbed the hypothetical ringleader "The Phantom Bandit." The search intensified as the gang set-

tled down to a career in banking. Or un-banking, if you prefer.

The holdups stopped as abruptly as they had started. They began again a week later and a thousand miles away.

In that city, five bank tellers agreed upon the bandit's description—they all described, in detail, the bank examiner who had arrived half an hour earlier to audit the accounts. Only when that

dumfounded man proved that he had been closeted with the bank's president during the robbery was he released from custody.

It was Whatsisname, of course. There are two outward measures of an artist's success: fame and money. As the Phantom Bandit, ringleader of an infamous but nonexistent gang, he had both.

He never repeated a characterization. Once he had used a face, a voice, a gait, posture and body mannerism he discarded it forever. This precluded any chance of a former victim accidentally encountering him and calling the cops.

Whatsisname's sense of humor led to other refinements, too. He would often impersonate a man he knew to have an airtight alibi for the time of the crime; he'd watch a man get on a bus and, moments after the bus pulled out, assume that man's appearance to stage a heist.

If he'd quit after a reasonable number of scores the chances are he'd never have been brought to justice. But headlines such as "Phantom Bandit Strikes Again," obviously constituted a demand for an encore.

He staged it at the Broadway and 38th Street branch of the Thirteenth National Bank. In a neat business suit and soft hat, the only difference between Whatsisname and any ten other customers at that time of day was the small revolver he showed the cashier—that and the fact that he emerged less than two minutes later at least $20,000 richer.

He felt good about the job, for it was his smoothest to date. Exciting, he'd dashed around the corner, discarded the hat, slowed to a limping crawl and hobbled towards a nearby coffee-shop. He'd entered and paused just inside the doorway, glancing around for a new matrix.

Within seconds he'd spotted his man, one who was just finishing up his coffee. Their clothing was similar and they were approximately the same size, which was all Whatsisname needed. His model had sloping eyebrows, a squint which hinted at myopia, and compressed nostrils. He held his head

as if his neck hurt, and moved with the deliberate rhythms of a much heavier man. Whatsisname watched him get up and pay his check, and listened for the timbre of his voice.

As the man left, the Phantom Bandit assumed the squint and the stance, compressed his nostrils and lumbered into the vacant seat. He waved the waitress over.

"More coffee, please," he murmured.

The girl lifted her eyebrows. "I thought you left."

"Had to get cigarettes."

There were sirens now, racing toward the bank. A few patrons craned to see the excitement, but Whatsisname stayed put. He hated drinking from another man's cup, but on the counter was all the evidence he could want to prove that for at least fifteen minutes he'd been there eating his lunch.

"You didn't give me a check," he mumbled at the waitress.

"It musta blown off the counter," she said. "I'll get you another one."

At the first sound of the sirens, Sergeant Sheldon Sachs was stepping into his unmarked car. Thirty seconds on the radio gave him the particulars—since he was within a block of the bank, he left the car at the curb and hurried on foot toward the scene of the robbery, his eyes scanning the sidewalk crowd and peering into every reasonable hiding spot.

It was inevitable that Sachs should look in the restaurant window. He blinked. Only his training as a poker faced plainclothes cop saved him from performing a double take. He walked in.

Whatsisname didn't even see him enter. He felt safe until Sachs tapped him on the shoulder.

"Come along quietly," Sergeant Sachs ordered, his voice low. "You're under arrest."

"What for?" said the man with the myopic squint.

"Bank robbery," Sachs said.

Whatsisname grinned. It was a new kind of applause.

"All right," he said, not bothering to look at his accuser. "No argument. Can I finish my coffee?"

Sachs picked up the lunch check. "Stand up," he said.

The Phantom Bandit stood up, keeping his eyes straight ahead, holding his head as if his neck hurt, moving with the body rhythm of a much heavier man. Sachs instructed him to place his hands on the counter and lean over. Nearby customers watched avidly as Sachs, from behind, pocketed Whatsisname's gun and riffled through the thick bankroll he found in the Phantom's coat.

"Tell me, officer, what'd I do wrong?"

"Turn around."

The Phantom Bandit turned, getting his second good look at the face of the plainclothes cop whose coffee he had just finished.

THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

SHE's quite a gal, this dynamic girl agent whom Alexander Waverly describes to his top men as "An armful of dark-haired danger." She's sultry April Dancer, the brilliant new queen of espionage and sudden death who has joined forces with U.N.C.L.E. in its never ending war with the evil that is THRUSH. Every issue of *The Girl from U.N.C.L.E. Magazine* will feature her in a lead novel streamlined to your reading pleasure and featuring the most sensational cast of spy stars ever to take a reading public by storm.

METRO GOLDWYN MAYER-ARENA'S *smashing nation-wide television show, like this, its magazine counterpart now has a sensational new partner, "The Girl from U.N.C.L.E.". It has already joined its famous* BIG BROTHER *to make the U.N.C.L.E. adventures the most talked-about thrill on the air-ways. Be sure to follow them also in this great new magazine,* THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E.

AND REMEMBER—The Girl from U.N.C.L.E. will continue to present, each month, the kind of high octane stories you like, featuring and co-starring with April Dancer the brilliant Mark Slate, "The man whose business is Danger." Plus, of course, Napoleon Solo, Ilya Kuryakin and Alexander Waverly, the famous U.N.C.L.E. trouble-threesome who have revolutionalized spy adventure fiction everywhere.

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